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# **(Non-)Religious Bias in Secularization Research**

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# Abstract

The theory of secularization posits that religion declines as modernization unfolds. Once a dominant paradigm, it is now one of the most contested topics in the sociology of religion. This PhD thesis questions whether the long-standing dispute over secularization persists not because the empirical evidence is inherently problematic, but because researchers bring their own religious (or secular) expectations into the study of religious change. The central question is whether part of the variability in research conclusions is driven by bias in the form of scholars' own religious beliefs. Drawing on original data from researchers and their publications, the thesis combines surveys, vignette experiments, and computational text analysis. Chapter 2 provides a systematic overview of the literature through Structural Topic Modeling; Chapters 3 and 4 examine religious (or secular) bias in research production and evaluation. Results indicate that scholars' religiosity significantly influences research production: religious researchers report less support for the secularization thesis, while secular researchers report more. When it comes to research evaluation, religiosity has limited impact on assessments of secularization studies, but more religious scholars favor studies portraying religion as socially beneficial. These findings suggest that controversies over religious change might not be resolved solely by accumulating more empirical evidence, as researchers' own ideological orientations shape the research process as well. Beyond religious studies, the thesis contributes to broader debates on objectivity and bias, demonstrating that the influence of values in science can be empirically examined rather than merely debated philosophically. Future research should investigate the mechanisms through which values operate and identify the domains where it matters most—moving the debate from normative questions (should social science be value-free?) to empirical ones (under what conditions is it value-influenced?). Understanding the role of researchers' values is particularly relevant to push the social sciences toward greater transparency, openness, and replicability.



# Contents

<b>Contents</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 The Secularization Debate . . . . .	8
1.2 How Religious Beliefs Can Enter the Research Process . . . . .	19
1.3 Navigating Identities between Science and Religion . . . . .	24
1.4 Research Problem and Description of Chapters . . . . .	28
<b>2 The Contemporary Debate on Secularization and its Cross-National Variation</b>	<b>31</b>
2.1 Introduction . . . . .	32
2.2 Theoretical Background . . . . .	33
2.3 Data, Method and Measures . . . . .	36
2.4 Limitations . . . . .	44
2.5 Results . . . . .	45
2.6 Conclusions . . . . .	51
2.7 Appendix . . . . .	53
<b>3 The Faith Factor. How Scholars' Religiosity Biases Research Findings on Secularization</b>	<b>55</b>
3.1 Introduction . . . . .	56
3.2 Theoretical Background and Hypothesis . . . . .	57
3.3 Data, Method and Measures . . . . .	61
3.4 Results . . . . .	68
3.5 Conclusions . . . . .	73
3.6 Appendix . . . . .	76
<b>4 God meets Peer Review: Is There a Religious Bias in Research Evaluation?</b>	<b>83</b>
4.1 Introduction . . . . .	84

4.2	Theoretical Background and Hypothesis . . . . .	85
4.3	Data, Methods and Measures . . . . .	89
4.4	Results . . . . .	94
4.5	Conclusions . . . . .	100
4.6	Appendix . . . . .	103
4.7	Questionnaire . . . . .	111
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>119</b>
	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>119</b>
5.1	Summary of Results . . . . .	119
5.2	Theoretical Contributions . . . . .	120
5.3	Future directions . . . . .	122
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>126</b>

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Secularization Debate

#### Modernization and Secularization

The future of religion in modern societies has been a key problem for sociological research since its early stages as a discipline (Durkheim, 1912; Weber, 1904). From these foundational years, secularization theory emerged as the dominant framework for understanding religion's transformation in contemporary society and its cultural, political, and economic implications (Pollack, 2015). Yet, secularization is as old as sociology itself (Stark & Iannaccone, 1994), and like many concepts having a long tradition in a field, it suffers from persistent ambiguity in both application and interpretation, resisting univocal definition (Dobbelaere, 1981, 1999; Tschannen, 1991).

In general terms, the theory of secularization rests on the idea that modernization causes serious problems to religion, ultimately leading to its long-term decline (Wallis & Bruce, 1995). Modernity profoundly transforms the social imaginary we live in. Charles Taylor (2007) describes this process as the rise of the “immanent frame”, a condition in which everything in life can be understood without reference to the Transcendence, “as if God did not exist”. This is the “Secular Age” of our modern times, a “disenchanted world” where rationalization supplant magic, mystery, prophecy, and the sacred (Wilson, 1976).

Modernization itself constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon. It can be understood as a long-term process of cultural and social change driven by economic and technological innovation affecting different domains of social life (Inglehart, 1997), or as an increase in societal complexity across technological, institutional, and cultural domains (Stolz & Tanner, 2019). First, material well-being and financial security provides new secular instruments for improving living conditions. Second, the change of regulations and social organizations leads to the differentiation of societal sub-spheres, democratization, and bureaucratization. Social activities come

to be classified into autonomous functional systems (e.g., business, education, law, politics, and medicine). Finally, cultural modernization reflects the diffusion of Enlightenment ideas and a scientific worldview, and it is associated with the growth of individualistic, emancipatory, egalitarian, and democratic values. Ruiter and Van Tubergen (2009) similarly differentiate between three dimensions of modernization: (1) modernization of ideologies, whereby expanded education fosters a rational worldview; (2) modernization of social ties, in which weakened and simplified social networks diminish community control over individuals; and (3) modernization of economies, in which financial, social, and political securities diminish the need for religious reassurance.

The simple and appealing claim linking modernization and secularization, however, becomes much more complex once put to the empirical test. To unpack such complexity, scholars have proposed to treat secularization as a multidimensional concept (Gorski & Altinordu, 2008). A successful systematization was proposed by Karel Dobbelaere (1981) who distinguished between three levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro. At the macro level, religion loses its overarching social authority as different institutional spheres—economy, politics, education—gain autonomy. At the meso level, religious organizations themselves undergo rationalization and adaptation to secular norms. Most sociologists do not challenge this first part of the story regarding societal and organizational secularization. For example, it is well established that most of the societies today separate the church from the state or the school from the religious authority, undergoing a process of laicization and functional differentiation (Chaves, 1994). However, things get complicated once we go down to the individual level. While for some researchers, religious decline at the individual level is undeniable and beyond doubt (Kasselstrand et al., 2023; Stolz et al., 2023), others point to alternative trajectories. They point, for example, to the persistence of religious belief in private and invisible forms (Luckmann 1967; Casanova 1994), the spread of diffuse (Cipriani, 2017) and vicarious religion (Davie, 2002), implicit and lived religion (Ammerman, 2014; Bailey, 1997), or the upsurge of new forms of spirituality and religious movements (Tromp et al., 2020).

Over the past decades, the social scientific study of religion has produced extensive empirical evidence on both the decline of religion in different parts of the world and the possible explanations behind it. The following sections attempt to summarize the empirical evidence supporting the thesis of religious decline, by dividing between descriptive theories on *how* religion decline and explanatory theories on *why* it does so, following the analytical structure proposed by Stolz (2020) and Voas (2020).

## ***How* religion declines**

A central finding in secularization research is that religious decline occurs primarily through generational replacement rather than individual apostasy during the life course, resembling a demographic transition (Molteni & Biolcati, 2023; Voas, 2009). The process unfolds as younger, more secular cohorts gradually replace older, more religious ones, weakening processes of religious transmission during a theoretically long period of time.

This secular transition is neither sudden nor uniform, but rather gradual and marked by an intermediate stage of “fuzzy fidelity” (Brauer, 2018; Storm, 2009; Voas, 2009). This process is thought to be virtually irreversible in the long run (Voas & Doebler, 2011). Moreover, this process tends to follow a sequential pattern: first, the decline of religious practices; second, the erosion of the individual importance attributed to religion; and lastly, the weakening of nominal belonging (Stolz et al., 2025). According to this sequence called P-I-B (Participation-Importance-Belonging) generations give up on more costly activities first: religious participation requires more time and resources than valuing and belonging. Adherents are slower in quitting a religious identity because it is not necessarily a burden. This sequence unfolds worldwide, with Post-Soviet Eastern countries among the few exceptions that deviate from this pattern (Stolz et al., 2025).

Although extensive progress has been made in describing how religion declines, attempts to explain why it does so have been less conclusive (Molteni, 2025; Voas, 2020). Nevertheless, several theoretical perspectives have been tested, each offering insights into the mechanisms of religious waning. The following paragraph attempts to organize these contributions in 5 research lines: (1) existential and material security, (2) education and scientific worldviews, (3) socialization and attenuation of communities, (4) secular competition, and (5) pluralism.

## ***Why* religion declines**

### (1) Existential and Material Security

The idea that religion functions as a coping mechanism against stress and insecurity has a long tradition in sociology, as well as anthropology and psychology (Hogg et al., 2010; Malinowski, 1948). Religion offers hope, meaning, and promises of a better life in the face of hardship, thereby serving a compensatory function for the deprived. Thus, when existential threats are reduced to minimum by the comforts of modern life, religion stops to be a useful resource. Norris and Inglehart (2011) drew from this idea for their greatly influential book *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide* which stimulated a major line of research. Drawing on data

from roughly 80 countries, they demonstrated a strong correlation between religiosity and indicators of economic development. Their findings suggest that societies with higher levels of economic and social security tend to experience a steady decline in religiosity. This supports the view of religion as a mechanism to cope with insecurity, whether egotropic (stemming from individual risks such as unemployment, loneliness, or poor health) or sociotropic (arising from societal factors such as war, economic crises, or pandemics) (Molteni, 2025). Yet at least two key limitations remain. First, although the correlation is strong at the national level (tested through e.g. associations between average religiosity and country’s technological advancement or economic development), the relationship becomes considerably weaker when examining individuals within countries (tested through e.g. the relationship between religiosity and individual exposure to death and violence or changing in income) (Molteni, 2025). Moreover, the high correlation between insecurity and religiosity at the country level may be confounded with other correlated variables such as literacy rate, educational attainment, and access to mass media, providing different interpretations for the observed relationship (Stolz, 2020). Second, longitudinal studies show that improvements in individuals’ socio-economic conditions are associated with declining religiosity, but the reverse is not observed (Storm, 2017). The few distressing events that appear capable of triggering increases in religiosity tend to have only modest and short-lived effects (Molteni, 2021; Molteni et al., 2021). Possible solutions for issues of reverse causality and endogeneity have only recently begun to emerge (van Tubergen et al., 2023).

## (2) Education and scientific worldviews

Another line of research originates from the assumption that scientific thinking is incompatible with religious belief and thus as rational orientations expand, religious worldviews become fragmented and eroded. Researchers relate the increasing levels of schooling and scientific development to fostering rational thinking that eventually leads to the erosion of religious worldviews. This is demonstrated at the aggregate level, that educational expansion is linked with higher shares of non-affiliated. Again, evidence remain more scattered at the individual level, with research pointing to both positive and negative relationships and minor effects (Bacon & Wang, 2024; Need & de Graaf, 1996; Schwadel, 2011, 2014). Two main problems affect the debate on the education-secularization link. First, educational expansion can be confounded with other measures of modernization and a third variable may cause the two, making claims not free from endogeneity bias. Second, effects can be explained by self-selection processes and reverse causality cannot be excluded. To overcome these problems, studies have started to use changes in com-

pulsory school leaving age as an instrumental variable concluding that each extra year of education reduced religiosity (Dilmaghani, 2019; Hungerman, 2014; Liang & Dong, 2019; Masuda & Yudhistira, 2020; Mocan & Pogorelova, 2017; Özer et al., 2024). Panel studies also confirm the negative relationship (Becker et al., 2017; van Ingen & Moor, 2015).

### (3) Socialization and attenuation of community

Since religious decline has been shown to occur largely through generational replacement, scholars have emphasized the prominent role of religious socialization. Younger cohorts increasingly grow up without adopting religion, whether due to parental non-transmission, secular educational environments, or broader cultural settings (Crockett & Voas, 2006; Kelley & De Graaf, 1997; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017; Voas & Storm, 2012).

Family remains at the center of investigation when studying the missing transmission of religious values, as parents represent the primary agents of religious socialization for children. The parent–child gap in religious attendance is substantial and stable across cohorts, as reported in a recent study by Stolz et al. (2024). Yet its underlying explanation remains unclear. None of the family characteristics measured in their study convincingly accounts for parent–child differences in religiosity. This might suggest that the lack of religious transmission is not directly driven by weakened socialization within the family, but rather by broader structural transformations in society that operate independently of individual or familial attributes (Stolz et al., 2024). Beyond this direct and vertical transmission of religiosity from parent to child, there is another horizontal peer transmission (van Tubergen, 2020). School peers (Regnerus et al., 2004; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006) or a spouse (Need & de Graaf, 1996; Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001) can affect the religiosity of an individual, although to a lesser extent.

Another factor contributing to the decline of religious socialization is the erosion of social ties. If communities keep religion alive, then modernity poses a structural challenge: high levels of social and geographical mobility, increasing division of labor, and the differentiation of individual life paths all undermine communal bonds. As communities weaken, they exercise less influence over their members, including in their capacity to transmit and maintain religious practices (Ruiter & Van Tubergen, 2009). Church attendance rates decline as individualization increases (van Ingen & Moor, 2015). The successful maintenance of social norms requires tight and dense networks. However, as normative pressure decreases, practices such as church attendance shift from communally prescribed expectations to matters of personal choice.

## (4) Secular competition

Religion, once central to law, politics, welfare, education and leisure, has gradually been confined to a narrower space with diminished influence. As rationalization unfolds, secular alternatives emerge, framing life in terms of instrumental consideration, utilitarianism and technical efficiency. These new and powerful alternatives replace spiritual goals with secular ones, prioritizing utility over transcendence (Stolz, 2010). As specialized and efficient secular institutions compete with costly and scattered religious ones, religion loses the battle and retracts its importance. Secular solutions respond to human problems better than religion does. For example, spiritual healing give way to biomedicine, prayer to insurance, and Sunday mass to leisure opportunity (Stolz et al. 2016). Because of this functional superiority, individuals have less and less incentives not to turn their backs on religion. Among the empirical evidence on the matter, welfare spending by the state is shown to be negatively correlated with religious participation (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004) although some studies question whether this association holds at the individual level (Te Grotenhuis et al. 2015).

## (5) Pluralism

Peter Berger famously argued that secularization is driven by religious pluralism. In *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), he described how exposure to diverse belief systems undermines a shared plausibility structure. Belief in God, once an unchallenged and unproblematic default option, becomes a choice among many alternatives, a choice that often requires explicit justification. José Casanova (2011) describes the "naturalization of unbelief" as one of the key features of secularization theories. In increasingly pluralistic societies, individuals are more likely to encounter significant others belonging to different faiths, thereby weakening the taken-for-granted status of their own tradition. In a broader perspective, the process of modernization creates a pluralization of life-worlds or of institutional domains (Berger, 1967), fragmenting the social world into less coherent wholes for each individual. This classical secularization theory linking pluralism and religious disinvolvement received the strongest criticism from Finke and Stark (1988, 1992), and their market approach to studying religion. In fact, they argued that religious pluralism has a positive effect on participation because, in highly competitive contexts, churches must actively compete for adherents, thereby stimulating higher levels of participation. The debate remained inconclusive for long, until Voas, Olson, and Crockett (2002) demonstrated that earlier findings were flawed due to a mathematical oversight. Recent evidence correcting the flaws gives robust credit to the original idea of religious pluralism

causing secularization (Olson et al., 2020).

## Empirical Critiques

For much of the twentieth century, the secularization thesis remained the dominant paradigm. More than a theory, secularization was a “fact” (Kasselstrand et al. 2023). However, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, critics highlighted counterexamples that cast doubt on the inevitability of religious decline, starting a “contentious phase” (Stolz 2020). The persistence of church attendance in the United States, the rise of New Religious Movements, the resurgence of fundamentalism, and the visible role of religion in politics all suggested that religion was not disappearing but rather transforming. By the 1990s, critics were calling secularization a “falsified” theory (Stark & Iannaccone 1994). Rodney Stark’s article *Secularization, R.I.P.* (1999) symbolically declared the thesis “dead,” proposing that it should be consigned to the “graveyard of failed theories”. Today, very few terms have the ability to shape academic debate within the sociology of religion as much as secularization. The debate is one of the most contentious in the subfield, dividing critics and defenders into opposing camps. The following section attempts to systematize the main points of contention into five problems: definition, method, space, time, and counterexamples.

### (a) A problem of Definition: what is declining?

The first issue concerns the very definition of religion. Much commentary has emphasized the rise of “diffused,” “invisible,” and “lived” religion, forms of less institutionalized but still socially significant religiosity (Ammerman, 2013; Cipriani, 2017; Davie, 1990, 1994; Hervieu-Léger, 2003; Luckmann, 1967). In this perspective, what is declining is not religion itself but “churched religion”, that is, a specific historical form of institutionalized faith (Gauthier, 2020). The religious individualization thesis can be seen as the main critic developed against secularization along this line (Pollack & Pickel, 2007). It argues that modernization transforms rather than eliminates religion: personal interest in spirituality persists, though increasingly detached from collective practice or identity. Similar arguments appear in claims of a “spiritual revolution”, pointing to the growth of esoteric, holistic, and alternative spiritualities (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Luckmann, 1967).

Yet the problem lies in what we count as religious. As Casanova (2006, p. 10) observes, “the religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutually condition each other”. But what is religion is an unresolved question as well (Lyon, 1985). A basic distinction can fall between those who prefer to see religion within

organized church membership and practice, that is easier to measure empirically, and those who prefer broader definitions that include phenomenon such as magic or superstition.

Although traditional religiosity is easier to measure than new forms of "diffused" religion or spirituality, recent evidence empirically demonstrates that religious and spiritual beliefs are weakening in substance, salience, and strength among affiliated and disaffiliated alike, disproving arguments of invisible religion (Voas, 2025a).

The case of New Religious Movements (NRMs) illustrates the problem of definitions in the secularization controversy. NRMs are religions that are more recent in their origins than large, well-established faiths that faced a significant popularity in advanced societies during the 1950s and 1960s. These recent religious expressions were first defined "cults" and subsequently upgraded to the current term of NRMs (Richardson, 1993). This allowed scholars to present their growth as evidence of continuing religious vitality, seemingly counteracting secularization. However, already in the early '80s, scholars like Wallis and Wilson argued that new movements were themselves products of secularization, filling the void left by traditional religion. From this perspective, NRMs functioned as marginal protest movements with little influence on broader society (Wilson, 1982). By the early 1980s, they were already regarded with suspicion, not as signs of renewal but as outcomes of indifference, confirming secularization (Wallis, 1984). Moreover, most NRMs struggle to transmit commitment across generations, with membership remaining largely first-generation, thereby raising serious problems of continuity (Barker, 2012).

(b) A problem of Method: how do we measure it?

A methodological divide seems to shape the dispute over secularization between quantitative and qualitative researchers. Quantitative studies often seek to define general models, ideally applicable to as many societies as possible. This approach is highly criticized by some scholars who argue that the assumption that less developed countries will necessarily catch up with more economically advanced ones to undergo the same secular transition reflects an outdated evolutionist perspective. Instead, these authors call for gendered and decolonial narratives of religious change (Müller 2020) more attentive to qualitative changes (Gauthier 2020).

In addition, much quantitative research relies on large-scale international surveys that use structured, closed-ended questions designed to capture religiosity primarily through traditional Christian beliefs and practices. This framework rests on the classical assumption of religious decline, often overlooking emerging forms of spirituality such as New Age movements (Houtman et al., 2012). As a result, focusing mainly on church attendance and conventional indicators may lead to underestimating con-

temporary religiosity, even within Western societies (Houtman et al., 2012). While most sociologists agree that secularization is a multidimensional phenomenon, some approaches reduce it to a single dimension. For instance, economists of religion, emphasizing the supply side of religious offerings, have focused almost exclusively on religious participation and membership (Gorski & Altınordu, 2008). Religious practice, such as prayer or attendance to religious services, is probably the most investigated measure of religiosity because of its availability and comparability, and its ability to detect strong forms of religiosity (Molteni & Biolcati, 2018). Moreover, questions about religious practice are generally understood as being less problematic both to formulate and to understand (Molteni & Biolcati, 2018). The difficulty in capturing the religious phenomenon lays in the interconnection of its supernatural, practical, ritual, and normative aspects (Molteni, 2020). Many attempts were made to produce a comprehensive measure to capture all the dimensions supposed to underlie the idea of religiosity resulting in various scales and typologies. Following Glock (1962), contemporary research tend to treat religiosity as a multidimensional concept. In the framework of this thesis, religiosity is understood as a set of beliefs, experiences and actions referring to a religion (Glock 1962; Molteni 2020; Stolz & Tanner 2019).

(c) A problem of Space: did we look outside the West?

The issue of secularization is closely tied to the geographical scope of research. Comparative studies beyond Europe and North America have been largely neglected in the study of religious change (Casanova, 2006). Because of this, some scholars proposed the idea of "European exceptionalism," contending that secularization is largely confined to Western Europe, while religiosity remains strong elsewhere in the world (Berger et al., 2008; Davie, 2006). In line of this, other authors suggest that no universal path of religious decline can be detected and that we should instead focus on "multiple secularities" existing (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt, 2012). Moreover, postcolonial scholars warn that portraying European societies as a model for global secularization processes risks reinforcing ethnocentric assumptions (Müller, 2020). One of the most striking counterexamples to the modernization-secularization general model has been the United States, a country characterized by both high levels of economic development and large and steady shares of religious population.

However, more recent evidence suggest that cultural and geographical contingencies are less pronounced than once assumed and that differences among countries can be explained by the different times countries undertake the secular transition (Stolz et al., 2025). Religiosity is demonstrated to decline in United States alike (Brauer, 2018; Voas & Chaves, 2016) and the secular transition is visible in Muslim-

majority countries as well, to a lesser extent because they are in the early stages. Post-Soviet Eastern Europe are the sole exceptional case (Stolz et al., 2025).

(d) A problem of Time: is there really a religious past?

Another critique questions the historical baseline of secularization. If secularization represents a transition from a religious past to a secular modernity, when exactly was this “age of faith” (Stark, 1999)? Some argue that such a period may never have existed, or at least it is hard to locate in history (Lyon, 1985). In critics view, the dichotomy between a rural, traditional, community-centered religious past and the industrial, individualistic, secular present is too simplistic to hold. If we sign up this vision, it becomes crucial to be specific on what was the starting point of secularization. One possible reference is the medieval period, when the "sacred canopy" seemed to cover the whole of society. Yet the question remains whether this was truly an age of faith, or rather a period of church-dominated social control (Lyon, 1985). Rodney Stark (1999) goes further, arguing that the image of a deeply pious past is largely a myth. Drawing on historical evidence from medieval Europe, he documents low attendance at mass and widespread ignorance among the clergy, concluding that religious participation was already weak in northern and western Europe centuries before the onset of modernization (Stark, 1999).

Remaining with the temporal dimension, another point of reflection for critics is the institutional durability of religious confessions. Major religious denominations have outlasted secular governing regimes throughout the centuries. Given this relative success of major churches, it seems difficult to envision religion’s fading destiny. Indeed, comparing the contemporary distribution of major churches worldwide with historical maps reveals a virtually superimposable picture. Beyond denominational identification, overall religiosity in populations also appears to remain persistent over time, both at the collective level and across individual life courses (Hout & Fischer, 2014), signaling a "religious stickiness" (van Tubergen, 2020).

(e) Counterexamples: what if religion resurges?

Finally, cases of religious revival are frequently cited as challenges to secularization. Rational choice theorists, for instance, pointed to the growth of new religious movements and upstart sects to deny religious decline (Finke & Stark, 1992; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). Other striking examples come from post-socialist orthodox countries, Pentecostal communities and Muslim countries (Stolz & Novak, 2023). Moreover, temporary increases in religiosity have been observed in response to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Molteni et al., 2021) and violent conflicts (van Tubergen et al., 2023), or as a backlash to rapid liberalization or post-authoritarian

change (Stolz et al., 2023). Yet, evidence concludes that such revivals are temporary and occurring within a broader trajectory of secularization rather than reversing it (Molteni et al., 2021; Stolz et al., 2023). Events of religious revival are thus considered fully compatible with a general secularization framework (Stolz & Voas, 2023).

## Normative Critiques

Doubts about the declining role of religion in today’s society have increasingly moved beyond the community of specialists in the sociology of religion. During the last year, mainstream media outlets have portrayed religion as experiencing a resurgence, particularly among younger cohorts. Headlines include “*Church attendance among Gen Z has quadrupled*” (The Independent, April 2025), and ““*A revival is happening’: Church hails resurgence among young in UK*” (Guardian, April 2025), “*Why more young people are turning to religion*” (Le Monde, December 2025), “*The West has stopped losing its religion*” (The Economist, June 2025). As Voas (2025b) cautions, such accounts often rely on localized, selective, or methodologically weak evidence. Their prominence appears to derive less from systematic empirical support than from their capacity to challenge established expectations of religious decline. In this sense, the visibility of these narratives may tell us more about the appeal of counterintuitive claims than about a substantive reversal of secularization processes.

If collecting vast and high-quality empirical evidence of the trends of religious decline has proved insufficient to find scholarly agreement on the topic, it might be worth considering whether there is something else we missed exploring. Could it be that the key to understanding the dispute lies not in the persistence of the supernatural but in the religious commitments of those who study it? Could it be that religion produces a bias towards wishful thinking, manifesting in denying or downgrading evidence of religious decline? Interestingly, this is a hypothesis not completely new to sociologists of religion, and we can find traces of it in the literature.

The debate over secularization has been characterized by an explicit accusation of harbouring ideological bias in researching religious change from both sides of the dispute. Secularization defenders accused their critics of having an implicit assumption that religion is a natural and universal phenomenon with inherently positive effects on civic life (Dromi & Stabler, 2023). If religion is framed as natural and universal, it implies that religion is irremediably tied to human life, and it will die with it. It also implies that religious vitality is a desirable goal for public policy (Dromi & Stabler, 2023). Moreover, secularization defenders accuse their critics of

"moving the goalpost" by redefining religion in ways that allow them to argue for its persistence, even in contexts where empirical evidence suggests a decline and to offer ad hoc explanations instead of serious theoretical models (Kasselstrand et al., 2023; Voas, 2020). Their research has been described as a "hunt" for residual spirituality among the nones, denying the possibility that non-religious people are "just that" (Voas, 2025a).

On the other side, secularization promoters have also been criticized for carrying ideological and dogmatic propositions. Accused of being an "ideologically loaded term" (Martin, 2005), the secularization thesis was seen as "never either rigorously examined or even formulated explicitly and systematically" (Casanova, 1994, p. 17). Secularization turned to represent a notion of "mythological significance" (Glasner, 1977, p. 233), "a doctrine more than a theory [...] a taken-for-granted ideology" (Hadden, 1987, p. 588). In critics' views, the secularization thesis was seen as an ideology based on anti-religious sentiments and on ethnocentric perspectives, specifically that of the European experience of Christian Churches holding a monopolized position among scholars (Zielińska, 2013). David Martin defines secularization as a tool of counter-religious ideologies (1965, p.9) and Rodney Stark as a "product of wishful thinking" (1999, p. 269).

Overall, these scholars were not only criticizing secularization theory for its empirical failings but also for its devaluation of religion's potential for social good. What could have been a mere disagreement on facts about religious life soon became "a moral denunciation of research on religion as well" (Dromi & Stabler, 2023), questioning secularization as a value-laden research agenda.

## 1.2 How Religious Beliefs Can Enter the Research Process

### Value-free *vs.* Value-laden Social Science

Since the early stages of the emergence of sociology as an autonomous discipline, scholars have engaged in epistemological reflections about their position toward the objects of their study. As members of society, social researchers find themselves inevitably soaked in a cultural and social tradition and tied to certain intellectual preferences and standpoints. This represents a filter made of values and judgments between the social reality and those who try to make sense of it. The unresolved question is whether political, moral, and religious values in the social sciences should be bracketed as distortions or instead acknowledged as unavoidable dimensions of

knowledge production. This debate has fueled long-lasting clashes between epistemological and methodological positions within the social sciences, reflecting deeper tensions between post-positivist approaches and constructivist critique.

One of the first contributions to these methodological debates came from Max Weber, who famously advocated for a value-neutral and non-partisan approach to the social sciences (1949). While he admitted that values influence the selection of research questions and concepts, he maintained that scholars must strive for neutrality in the explanatory phase of research. In Weber's terms, value-relatedness is not a principle of judgment but rather a principle of choice: values delineate research objects without determining the outcome of inquiry. Scientific research should nevertheless be evaluated by cognitive criteria, not ideological standards—whether political, religious, or moral. Although Weber acknowledged that this is a difficult goal to achieve, it remains an indispensable ideal for sustaining a credible discipline. This postulate resonates with Merton's norm of "disinterestedness" in science (Merton, 1973).

While in Weber's time the opposing camp was represented by the German *historical school* of economics, which advocated a more explicitly normative sociology rooted in nationalist concerns (Voss, 2022), contrasting positions to sociology as a science in contemporary debate involve approaches that emphasize social justice-oriented engagement. "Public sociology" gained prominence with Burawoy's 2004 presidential address to the American Sociological Association (ASA). Public sociology seeks to align sociological research with the concerns of civil society, activist communities, and social movements (Burawoy, 2005), often informed by a progressive understanding of social justice (Turner, 2019). The tension between detachment and engagement remains salient in sociology, a discipline historically pulled between scientific autonomy and policy relevance (Hammersley, 2017). Understanding how non-epistemic values permeate the research process has direct implications for the way objectivity is conceived and practiced in the social sciences.

Despite the relevance of these debates, empirical evidence on the impact of ideological and moral values on knowledge production remains limited. Recent research suggests that both researchers' political orientations and individual traits can shape scientific outcomes. For example, Borjas and Breznau (2026) show that political ideology can influence results in policy-relevant research, while Eitan et al. (2018) find that, analyzing a large sample of academic abstracts, conservatives and conservative ideas are described significantly more negatively than liberals and liberal ideas. Similarly, Jelveh et al. (2024) document that researchers' political partisanship is reflected in the language and framing of their published work. These biases are not limited to research production but extend to research evaluation as well.

Experimental evidence shows that identical studies are often rated more favorably when their conclusions align with the evaluator’s political orientation (Abramowitz et al., 1975; Finseraas et al., 2022). Moreover, Sulik et al. (2024) demonstrate that cognitive and personality factors further shape scholars’ assessments of competing theories and evidence. These insights indicate that academic disagreements on contentious topics cannot always be resolved by simply accumulating more evidence, as researchers may continue to hold fundamentally different positions despite exposure to the same data.

Notably, however, there has been little investigation into whether religious commitments influence the scientific interpretation and study of religion and religious change. Secularization provides a compelling case for examining how (non-)religious values shape academic findings, as it is a highly controversial topic that has produced opposing results over a long period of time.

## Religious (or Secular) Bias in Studying Religious Change

Bias in research can be defined as a *systematic* deviation of results or findings from the true outcome, driven by non-epistemic factors (Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020). This definition highlights that bias is not a sporadic error, but rather a recurring distortion rooted in a field. It also implies that to identify bias, one needs to know what the unbiased result is, a task that is often particularly challenging in the social sciences, characterized by multiple perspectives and controversies. What can be done, however, is to evaluate the circumstances under which research appears biased. In particular, one can ask whether non-epistemic factors, such as researchers’ personal values and beliefs, are systematically associated with certain outcomes.

The next section proposes a model to distinguish the ways in which religious (or secular) values can enter the research process, in secularization research specifically, through explicit versus implicit bias, and to identify the stages at which such biases may arise, from the formulation of research questions to the dissemination of results. Beyond these stages of research production, bias can also manifest through broader structural dynamics such as co-authorship or citation networks.

Although the focus is on the consequences for secularization research, similar arguments can be applied to the study of religion in general. The scientific study of religion is highly evaluative toward religion. It produces evidence that sheds both negative and positive lights on religion (May & Smilde, 2018). For example, religion can be demonstrated to be associated with greater psychological well-being, political and social activism, support for liberal reforms, lower deviant behavior. On the other hand, religion research has highlighted negative outputs associated to it

like science skepticism, sexism, educational attainment, wealth accumulation. The outputs in terms of evaluative research on religion can be influenced by researchers' religiosity alike.

Religious or secular beliefs can *explicitly* influence research practices and scholarship. Some researchers may adopt activist positions that either defend or critique religion's place in society. Religious scholars may consciously downplay evidence of religious decline due to personal or institutional commitments, while secular scholars may exaggerate decline to advance a secularist agenda.

Bias may also be *implicit*. Human judgment is prone to distortions such as confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and blind-spot bias (Bishop, 2020). We tend to privilege evidence consistent with our expectations, a mechanism adaptive in daily life but problematic in science. When applied to scientific reasoning, *motivated science reception* leads individuals to assess findings through the filter of prior beliefs (Altenmüller & Poppe, 2024). Because of *bias blind spots*, scholars systematically underestimate the influence of their own predispositions. *Myside bias*, for example, drives them to design and evaluate studies in ways that confirm their existing commitments.

## The 5 Stages Religious Bias Can Enter the Research Process

### (1) Questions Asked

If questions do not determine answers, they can nonetheless constrain the range of answers that can potentially be arrived at. Religious and secular values may shape what is considered a legitimate research question or what is a relevant framework or approach to study it. Bias may enter not only in which questions are asked, but also in which are ignored. For example, research agendas shaped by secular values might neglect questions about the persistence of religiosity, while religiously oriented scholars may avoid exploring evidence of decline.

### (2) Sampling

Religious or secular bias can enter into the choice of cases, populations, or contexts. For instance, research on Western Europe and mainline Christianity is more likely to emphasize secularization than research on Africa or Pentecostalism (or both) due to the differing religious trends in these contexts (Stolz & Novak, 2023). Relatedly, personal ties to specific traditions may also shape their choice. Thus, those working in predominantly secular or religious contexts may risk overgeneralizing the religious trends of their specific area. A further issue concerns the reliance on convenience sampling rather than representative ones. Datasets are often drawn

from contexts to which researchers have easier access, such as their own societies, institutions, or religious traditions. While practical, this approach can reinforce partial perspectives and limit the scope of comparative generalizations, particularly if less accessible contexts remain systematically understudied.

### (3) Measurement

Religious or secular bias can manifest in the very measurement of key constructs in contested areas. The most important one concerns the measurement of religion itself. Different definitions of “religiosity” can lead to strikingly different conclusions about secularization. If operationalized through standardized indicators tied to organized religion, such as church attendance, the data might be more likely to indicate a process of religious decline. By contrast, if religiosity is measured in broader or de-institutionalized ways, such as personal spirituality, diffuse beliefs, or non-traditional practices, the evidence for secularization might appear less straightforward. Thus, choices about how to conceptualize and measure religion may reflect researchers’ own assumptions about what counts as “real” religion, with significant implications for the secularization debate.

### (4) Results’ Assessment

Interpretation of results can be subject to bias through misunderstanding of statistics, a desire for compelling narratives, or failure to consider alternative explanations (Jussim et al., 2016). For example, in an analysis of scientific abstracts in the field of social psychology, Eitan et al. (2018) found that conservatives and conservative ideas are described more negatively than liberals and liberal ideas and that conservatism is more likely to be the focus of explanation than liberalism. Not only is the interpretation of one’s own results at stake. The same fallacy can occur when assessing colleagues’ work, for instance, in peer review. Scientific findings are ideally interpreted consistently across readers. Yet research on reasoning shows that individuals frequently evaluate evidence through the lens of their own values and prior beliefs. Evidence aligning with expectations is more readily accepted, while contradictory findings tend to be dismissed (Hom & Van Nuland, 2019; Masnick & Zimmerman, 2009). Perceptions of methodological rigor are also affected: studies that challenge a person’s worldview are frequently rated as less sound than those that confirm it, even when methodological quality is equivalent (Munro et al., 2004). Bias in assessment might also extend to citation practices. Studies that support assumptions or narratives in line with one’s own orientations and perspectives might be more likely to be cited, thereby amplifying their visibility and creating the impression of consensus. By contrast, findings that challenge researcher’s perspectives

may receive less attention, regardless of their empirical quality, which contributes to shaping the overall trajectory of the field.

#### (5) Funding

Funding can also play a role in shaping outcomes in religion research. Concerns have already been raised about financial support from religious organizations or major initiatives such as the John Templeton Foundation (May & Smilde, 2018; Wiebe, 2009). The worry is that funding may exert implicit pressure on scholars to align their work with religious agendas, thereby promoting not a sociology of religion but a “religious sociology” (Dobbelaere, 2000). Attempts to empirically test this hypothesis remain limited. May and Smilde (2018) examined 40 years of journal articles on religion and found no evidence that receiving funding from private donors increases the likelihood of publishing research that portrays religion positively. Surprisingly, their analysis revealed a positive correlation between public funding and the publication of articles adopting favorable socio-evaluative stances toward religion.

### 1.3 Navigating Identities between Science and Religion

The debate on the role of values in science becomes even more problematic when we consider a special category of values: religious ones. Religious values have at least one peculiar characteristic making them special. They refer to a supranatural domain, which by their nature challenges the scientific endeavor. Science and religion have traditionally been positioned at opposite ends of a continuum, a zero-sum game of reality sense-making.

However, the research on how science and religion relate in people’s minds is object of debate. Some argue that an inevitable opposition exists between scientific beliefs and religious ones. According to the conflict thesis, religious and scientific values are understood as mutually exclusive (Evans & Evans, 2008; Preston & Epley, 2009) and that led the common thinking to associate the scientific endeavor with atheism. Scientists have been considered as the “carriers of the secularist impulse” (Ecklund, 2010:7), a projection of the growing authority of modern research dominating supernatural explanations, progressively placed on the margins. This strand of literature was based on findings on the different cognitive styles. While the religious mind is shown to maintain an intuitive thinking, the scientific one uses a counterintuitive, systematic, and analytic approach. Thus, they cannot be

combined. In line with this approach, a recent survey shows that scientists are, on average, less religious than the general population in international contexts (Ecklund et al., 2016; Ecklund & Park, 2009), and that scientists' level of religiosity is weakening over time (Ecklund et al., 2008). Moreover, scientists are more likely to embrace a "closeted faith" (Ecklund 2010, p. 43) that rarely becomes public within the academic community because of fear of backlash.

However, more recent literature started to claim the limitations of this model. By considering counter-intuitive examples of compatibility between science and religion, critics started to argue that people can simultaneously hold natural and supernatural beliefs without creating dissonance. This is called "explanatory coexistence" (Sharp et al., 2022; Sharp & Leicht, 2021). Elaine Ecklund's prominent work shows that, among a global sample of scientists, most of respondents do not think science as conflicting with religion. Instead, they see religion and science as operating in separate spheres (Ecklund et al., 2016).

Science and religion are not only a set of beliefs, meanings, and explanations, but they are associated with specific social identities as well. These identities also shape people's endorsement of the conflict or the compatibility model. Research indicates that atheists, followed by non-religious/agnostics, perceive the combination of "religious" and "scientist" as less intuitive and more counter-stereotypical, while religious individuals perceive this combination as less problematic (Sharp et al., 2022).

## Secularization Researchers: Who they are

Overall, the religious diversity of general scientists has received increasing attention globally (Ecklund et al., 2016, 2018; Ecklund et al., 2008), but what about the beliefs of social scientists of religion? Who studies secularization, and what do they believe in? The religious composition of social scientists studying religion remains largely unexplored. The first attempt to empirically map the values guiding scholars of religion was made by the *Values in Scholarship on Religion project (VISOR)* (Shults, et al., 2020). The aim of the VISOR project is to investigate which are the guiding values of scholars of religion by collecting data from a "snowball" sample of religious studies' scholars through an online survey. However, the project remains on a descriptive level and does not measure researchers' religiosity nor it explore whether and how these values shape the scientific study of religion.

Over the course of this PhD thesis, two original data collections were carried out in 2021 and 2025, both offering a picture of the religious landscape within the community of scholars researching secularization. The details of these data

collections are presented in the relevant chapters: Chapter 3 discusses the 2021 dataset, and Chapter 4 the 2025 dataset. In both data collection undertaken in this thesis, the focus is on three dimensions of religiosity: practice, belief, and self-assessed religiosity (Billiet, 2002; Voas, 2007).

This section provides an overview of the religious composition of secularization researchers across the two datasets. When asked about religious identification, respondents revealed a relatively balanced distribution between affiliated and unaffiliated positions. Slightly more than half reported membership in a religious denomination (54.3% in 2021 and 56.2% in 2025), a pattern consistent with earlier research on religiosity among natural and social scientists (Ecklund et al., 2016; Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007). Roughly 40% of the sample identify as either Catholic or Protestant, while other denominations represent minority groups, like Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish, as shown in Figure 1.1.

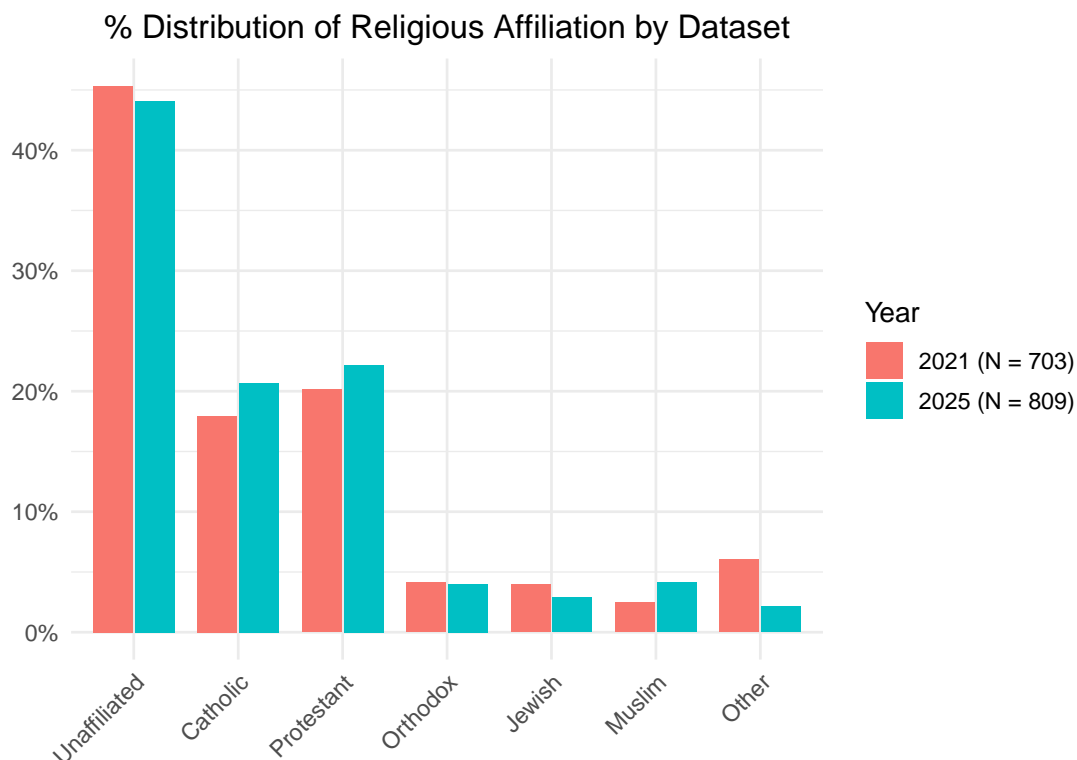


Figure 1.1: Percentage Distribution of Religious Affiliation by Dataset.

Figure 1.2 shows the average level of religiosity, ranging from 0 to 7, observed across the different religious affiliations. The scale is based on attendance of religious services, frequency of prayer, religious beliefs (e.g., belief in God, hell, heaven, and life after death), and on a self-assessment of religiosity.

The religiosity is constructed based on factor analysis. For both datasets the scale proved to be very consistent with high factor loadings and highly reliable,

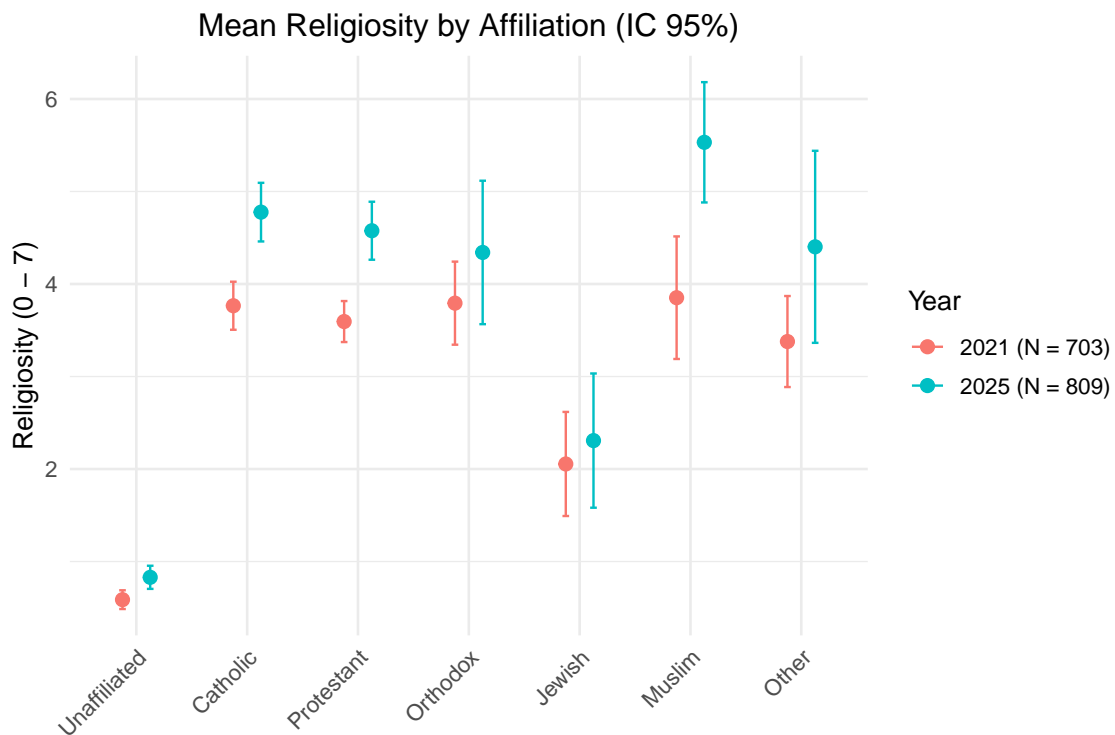


Figure 1.2: Level of Religiosity by Religious Affiliation.

with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87 in 2021 and 0.88 in 2025. Details on Factor Analysis can be found in the related chapters 3 and 4.

Looking at this landscape of scholars' affiliations, practices, and beliefs is important to foster an open and transparent scholarship and to encourage a self-reflection over the values that guide the discipline (Shults et al., 2020). The academic field of secularization research appears highly diverse in terms of religious identities and beliefs. This pluralism can represent a resource for the scholarly community: heterogeneity reduces the risk of being dominated by a single worldview, thereby preventing the field from becoming entirely skewed toward either secular or religious orientations. Diversity may also enhance discovery, creativity, and tolerance, while lowering the likelihood of groupthink (Duarte et al., 2015).

Concerns about value homogeneity are growing in the social sciences, as it is believed to create problems in how research is conducted and evaluated on sensitive topics such as immigration, equality, and discrimination (Borjas & Breznau, 2026; Duarte et al., 2015; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020). While social sciences of religion seem to be free from the risk of religious homogeneity, a high level of religious diversity can have its own consequences. Different value orientations may foster disagreement, which can ultimately result in the emergence of radically opposed schools of thought. That is the case with the secularization debate.

## Studying Religion Scientifically: Paradox or Possibility?

This relationship between scholars' values and their research object in the scientific study of religion has long been debated under the label of the *Insider/Outsider Problem*. This classic discussion asks whether researchers can truly understand religious beliefs and experiences they do not share, or conversely, whether being an "insider" undermines objectivity (McCutcheon, 1999). The distinction is particularly contentious in religious studies, since the grounding assumption of its scientific methods are in contrast with the supranatural features of religion and religious beliefs (Blum, 2018). Adopting natural sciences as a model, methodological naturalism was largely thought of as the proper approach to ensure legitimacy and objectivity to religious studies, by rejecting assumptions about the existence or non-existence of the supernatural. The "methodological atheism" proposed by Peter Berger (1967) and the "methodological agnosticism" by Ninian Smart (1973) propose that scholars should deny the possibility for the sacred to be real or true in the former or to suspend judgment about its ultimate reality in the latter.

Despite the relevance of the topic, the Insider/Outsider problem remains a subject of mostly philosophical and theoretical investigation. No attempt has been made to empirically provide a contribution to the discussion. A further fruitful understanding of the topic needs to go beyond the fundamental philosophical issues of meaning and language. It should provide evidence on the real and concrete consequences of being insider or outsider when researching religion. Does this dichotomy really matter when it comes to the scientific investigation of religion? What empirical reasons support the suggestion that researchers' personal stance actually affects their views when investigating religious beliefs and experiences? As Douglas (2007) argues, only by recognizing how values shape scientific practice can we fully understand why scholars reach different conclusions on the same issues and why controversies, such as the debate on secularization, persist.

## 1.4 Research Problem and Description of Chapters

In this introduction, we have sketched the main contours of the research problem on secularization: the forms and causes of religious decline, along with the criticisms raised from both empirical evidence and normative concerns. We have shown how disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences in results, methods, and background assumptions, turning secularization into both a scientific controversy and a moral minefield.

This PhD thesis questions whether the long-standing dispute over the trajectory

of religion may remain unresolved not because the empirical evidence is inherently problematic, but because researchers bring their own (non-)religious expectations into the study of religious change. The central question guiding this work is therefore whether research outputs are shaped, at least in part, by bias in the form of scholars' own religiosity. To address this question, the thesis draws on original data from two sources: individual researchers and their published articles. Primary survey data were collected in 2021 and 2025 through online questionnaires addressed to secularization researchers (Chapters 3 and 4), while published articles were analyzed both computationally and manually (Chapters 2 and 3).

Chapter 2 systematizes the academic debate on secularization through a data-driven approach. It applies structural topic modeling (STM), a computational text analysis technique, to a corpus of 1638 academic articles published between 2001 and 2022 on religious change. The goal is to provide a synthesis of the main themes addressed in the specialized literature and their respective levels of analysis, thereby enabling researchers to more easily grasp the structure of current scholarship on secularization and navigate a contested debate. Furthermore, the chapter explores the issue of institutional parochialism, namely the tendency of researchers to study religious communities culturally close to them. Drawing on authors' institutional affiliation, the analysis compares the geographical origin of scholars with the religious traditions they investigate.

Chapter 3 examines the presence of (non-)religious bias in the production of research on secularization. It tests whether some of the variability in findings about secularization may be attributed not to the social reality investigated, but to bias in the form of researchers' own religiosity. This study represents the first attempt to systematically examine the presence of this bias and its potential effects. To address this question, the chapter draws on original dataset of international scholars from various social science disciplines. First, an online survey was conducted among these scholars to measure their religiosity and their belief in the secularization thesis. Next, I coded their published articles, both empirical and conceptual, on secularization and religious change. Finally, the two datasets of researchers' attitudes and coded publications were linked. The analysis employs logistic regression models to examine the effect of authors' religiosity on two outcomes: (1) their personal belief in the secularization thesis, and (2) the likelihood of finding evidence for secularization in their published work.

Chapter 4 investigates the presence of (non-)religious bias in the evaluation of research on religion and religious change. Specifically, it examines whether religious or secular biases shape academic judgment. A vignette experiment conducted in May 2025 asked participants to evaluate two academic abstracts on controversial topics in

the field, with their conclusions randomly varied. The study also explores whether a study's conclusions influence how readers infer the author's religious identity.

# Chapter 2

## The Contemporary Debate on Secularization and its Cross-National Variation: A Systematization through Topic Modeling<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Secularization is a key concept in the social scientific study of religion, yet its meaning remains ambiguous due to varied definitions produced in the literature. This chapter aims to provide a data-driven systematization of the debate on religious change by analyzing 1638 academic articles published between 2001 and 2022 using structural topic modeling (STM), a computational technique for text analysis. The model differentiates the debate between institutional differentiation and individual trajectories of religious change, ranging from macro to micro dimensions of secularization. It also identifies critical perspectives, including supply-side and post-modernist theories. Finally, specific religious traditions are identified and analyzed, through a cross-national comparison, to test institutional parochialism, or the tendency for researchers to study their own communities. Results seem to discredit the idea that religious studies scholars neglect the study of non-Western religions. However, the contemporary debate on secularization is still heavily dominated by authors located in the West.

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## 2.1 Introduction

Secularization is one of the most important yet contested terms in the social sciences to describe the decline and transformation of religion facing modernity. The ongoing ambiguity in defining and forecasting secularization can be attributed to the diverse interpretations of the term across disciplines and the various levels of analysis employed to explore religious matters. Scholars have proposed different systematizations and summaries of a long-lasting debate based on different theoretical perspectives, goals, or dimensions (Casanova, 2006; Dobbelaere, 1981; Gorski & Altinordu, 2008; Pollack, 2015; Stolz, 2020; Tschannen, 1991).

This chapter aims to contribute to the literature by sorting the debate on secularization through the computational text analysis of its academic sources to better define current issues and strands of research. The goal is to find a synthesis of the main themes addressed in the specialized literature and their level of analysis to enable researchers to quickly grasp the structure of current studies of secularization and provide them with a useful output to navigate a contested debate. Furthermore, a cross-national comparison is advanced to test institutional parochialism, or the tendency among researchers to study religious communities that are culturally close to them. Many critics of the secularization thesis address the overemphasis on Western societies and Christian religions. This shift in the academic output may be attributed to the misrepresentation of countries and worldviews in religious studies scholarship (Ecklund, 2020) and the tendency for researchers to study topics of parochial concerns (Poulson & Campbell, 2010).

Using data retrieved from the Scopus database, this study quantitatively analyzes 1638 research articles on secularization and their metadata published between 2001 and 2022. First, journal articles are preprocessed and analyzed through Structural Topic Modeling (STM), a machine learning technique that automatically identifies latent themes underlying a set of text documents. A model with 13 topics is selected and interpreted to gain insights into the themes addressed in the literature and their varying levels of analysis. Additionally, topics related to different religious communities are further investigated to assess institutional parochialism within the debate, examining differences in topic prevalence among authors from different geographical regions. When addressing contested and theoretically broad terms like secularization, providing a concise summary can be particularly challenging. Topic modeling represents a powerful resource for getting new insights into the content and evolution of an academic field (Giordan et al., 2018; Lindstedt, 2019; Marshall, 2013). Furthermore, it enables the modeling of topic prevalence and its geographical dispersion, helping us to understand how the secularization research program is

diversifying the focus of its research.

## 2.2 Theoretical Background

Secularization developed as a theoretical argument in the social sciences as the main interpretation in sociological research for describing and explaining religious change in modern society (Pollack, 2015). However, secularization has hardly ever had a univocal meaning. Various endeavors have been made to systematize the array of definitions and theories proliferating in the literature since the 1970s (Casanova, 2006; Dobbelaere, 1981; Gorski & Altmordu, 2008; Pollack, 2015; Stolz, 2020; Tschannen, 1991), a period marked by the emergence of diverse secularization theories (Dobbelaere, 2016). Some authors, for example, treat secularization as a latent process, others as the outcome of a deliberate political project (Dobbelaere, 1981; Gorski & Altmordu, 2008). According to Pollack (2015), secularization can refer to either a descriptive historical process of the diminishing social significance of religion or as an explanatory theory of how and why religion and religious authority decline over time. Another crucial facet involves the distinction between the genealogical manner of use, regarding the extent to which theological meanings and concepts adapt to secular contexts, and the quantifying manner of use, referring to the study of the transformation of the religious significance and its impact in society (Pollack, 2015). This latter usage has found a place in social science investigations and represents the starting approach for the most influential theories in the ongoing sociological debate.

To further complicate the picture, sociological discussions take place at different levels of analysis. For example, secularization theories can be unidimensional or multidimensional. Among the first, the supply-side theory, as developed by scholars like Finke and Iannaccone (1993) focus exclusively on religious participation and membership (Gorski & Altmordu, 2008). Drawing on the rational choice theory framework, proponents argue that secularization occurs when the vitality of religious institutions decreases. Conversely, in contexts marked by high competition and religious pluralism, churches must actively strive to attract adherents, which ultimately fosters religious participation.

However, most of the theories regarding secularization in the social sciences adopt a multidimensional perspective (Gorski & Altmordu, 2008) and they often differentiate between three levels of analysis: macro, meso, and micro. At the societal level (macro), societal subsystems become differentiated along functional lines (Dobbelaere, 1981; Luhmann, 1977). Religion loses its overarching claims on social

segments such as economy, family, and state that progressively acquire autonomy (Wilson, 1982) and emancipate themselves from religious norms (Casanova, 2006). At the organizational level (meso), subsystems, free from religious ethos, operate on a rational base starting a process of rationalization and societalization of the subsystems (Wilson, 1982). Moreover, religious institutions themselves undergo a secularization process (Bruce, 2002) becoming more oriented toward worldly or mundane concerns and lowering their transcendental qualities (Luckmann, 2003; Tschannen, 1991). Specialist literature has extensively explored institutional differentiation and societal secularization, with Gorski and Altinordu (2008) identifying four key themes: religion and education, law and secularism, religion and politics, and the history of science, medicine, and professions. At the individual level, debates and disagreements emerge regarding changes in religious beliefs and practices.

The debate is characterized by disputes over the predictive trajectory of religious change and on the reasons why these changes happen. On the one hand, classical secularization theories refer to the declining rates of religious beliefs and practices (Casanova, 2006). Supporters of the classical thesis of religious decline developed different hypothetical mechanisms to explain the diminishing rates of various religious measures. For example, researchers relate the increasing levels of schooling and scientific development to fostering rational thinking that eventually leads to the erosion of religious worldviews (Dilmaghani, 2019; Hungerman, 2014; Mocan & Pogorelova, 2017). Another stream of the literature focuses on the compensation function of religion in coping with risks, anxiety, and stress and links the rise in economic and social development with lower levels of religiosity (Molteni, 2025; Norris, & Inglehart, 2004). Recent research has highlighted the role of parental socialization in determining adult religiosity (Crockett & Voas, 2006; Kelley & De Graaf, 1997; Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2017; Voas & Storm, 2012) and other relevant works discuss the replacement of religious cohorts by more secular ones (Coutinho & Laflamme, 2023; Molteni & Biolcati, 2023; Voas & Chaves, 2016). Finally, the theory of secular competition views religious decline as a consequence of the changing opportunity costs of religious participation and belief, which favor secular institutions (Stolz et al., 2016).

On the other hand, secularization has faced substantial criticism claiming that religion is undergoing transformation rather than outright decline. According to the individualization thesis religion becomes confined into the private and “invisible” sphere (Casanova, 2006; Davie, 1990, 1994). This suggests that even as religious membership declines, individuals do not necessarily lose their beliefs but instead maintain a form of “vicarious religion” (Davie, 2000). Other scholars have highlighted the rediscovery of the sacred in everyday practices, wherein individuals,

while eschewing total religious adherence, customize their beliefs and practices to suit their needs, thus creating their own "lived religion" (Ammerman, 2013). Similarly, scholars have noted the rise of alternative spirituality movements, as well as the adoption of Eastern religions and philosophies in Western contexts, as proof for the replacement of traditional forms of religious expression (Campbell, 2007).

For others, it is precisely this overemphasis on Western societies the core problem of the secularization thesis. Indeed, much of the criticism in the field derives from claims that secularization, originally developed to study modernization processes in Western Europe, too ambitiously encompasses universal perspectives, in an attempt to explain modernization processes in other societies as well (Pérez-Agote, 2014). Critics contend that classical predictions of religious decline are based on ethnocentric perspectives, specifically that of the European experience of Christian Churches holding a monopolized position among scholars (Zielińska, 2013). The problem is exacerbated by the institutional parochialism of the discipline (Poulson, 2011). Poulson and Campbell (2010) define institutional parochialism as a form of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) that drives academics to study their own societies more often than other communities. A parochial impulse is a normative desire to study people who are culturally similar, and this may bring a scholarship in the social sciences to become West-centric.

Previous research investigating the content of journal articles in the sociology of religion has shown that, despite calls for and progress in studying faith other than "mainline" Christianity, the scientific study of religion is still heavily characterized by institutional isomorphism (Poulson & Campbell, 2010) and a preference towards topics of parochial concern. Much of the research output, critics argue, takes place in Western countries where researchers have better access to Western communities. This would have created neglected categories in the literature, such as the Global South and Muslim communities (Ecklund, 2020; Poulson & Campbell, 2010). In this sense, many influential scholars have called for a decolonizing internal process of religious studies (Casanova, 2006; Parvez, 2017; Turner, 2011), challenging the reproduction of Europe and the US as the only focus of attention of social theorizing. Critics call for an increasing diversity in the religious studies scholarship and a reduced institutional parochialism among its members (Poulson, 2011; Poulson & Campbell, 2010). A proper adoption of a global perspective might reveal a much more diversified picture of secularization patterns (Lyon, 1985) through the reconfiguration of the analytical tools employed, in terms of data, concepts, and theories (Müller, 2020). Thus, the aim is to investigate whether significant differences exist among authors from diverse geographical backgrounds regarding their topic prevalence. The focus is on whether scholars exhibit a preference for studying culturally

close religious communities or denominations.

## 2.3 Data, Method and Measures

### Articles Selection

For the aims of the study an original dataset based on contemporary publications related to the topic of secularization is created through a systematic search on Scopus database. Scopus is a large and comprehensive citation database of peer-reviewed scientific literature that guarantees wide coverage and high quality citation index (Thelwall & Sud, 2022). 1638 research articles and their metadata are examined through an advanced text mining approach able to define topics within a large corpus of articles, that is, structural topic model (STM)<sup>2</sup>. The output is interpreted by inspecting words and documents associated with each topic and by assigning meaningful labels.

The chosen query on the Scopus search engine was (\*SECULARIZATION OR \*SECULARISATION) AND (RELIG\*). This query retrieves all research articles containing the term “secularization” (or “secularisation,” accounting for linguistic differences between American and British English) and its variations (e.g., “desecularization” or “postsecularization”). Variations of the word “religion” were included to avoid retrieving articles that mention secularization but do not address religion-related issues. The query was applied to the title, abstract, and keywords of journal articles published between 2001 and 2022 in English, Spanish, German, and French — the most frequently used languages in the articles on this topic within the database<sup>3</sup>. As of July 2023, the search resulted in an initial list of 2180 articles together with their meta-information. Titles and abstracts were manually screened and excluded according to selected criteria defined through an iterative process of reading and sorting. Four main exclusion criteria have been applied. These criteria, described in Table 1, are designed to select articles specifically focused on contemporary secularization within the social sciences and humanities.

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<sup>2</sup>Analysis is conducted mainly with the R package `stm` (Roberts et al., 2019), which handles function for model estimation, summary, and visualization. <http://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/stm>

<sup>3</sup>The complete reproducible query is: (TITLE-ABS-KEY(\*secularization) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY(\*secularisation) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(relig\*)) AND PUBYEAR > 2000 AND PUBYEAR < 2023 AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE,"ar" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) OR LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "French" ) OR LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "Spanish" ) OR LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "German" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SRCTYPE,"j" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( PUBSTAGE,"final" ) )

Table 2.1: Exclusion Criteria for Corpus Selection

Criteria	Description	Number of Articles Excluded
Language	Articles in languages other than English, Spanish, German and French incorrectly included in the list	13
Journal	Articles from journals that do not deal with humanities or social sciences topics according to the classification of Scimago Journal Ranking	16
Time	To limit the scope of the analysis to the contemporary period, articles dealing with topics relating to a period prior to 1945 are excluded	215
Topic	Articles that strictly regard the domains of literary or art criticism, architecture or design, and medical care practices	79

Selected articles were downloaded. 189 articles were not found, 10 duplicates were eliminated and 20 articles whose text could not be retrieved excluded. The final sample consists of 1638 journal articles. Articles in languages other than English are automatically translated to develop a unique topic model. The translation is done using Google Translator for documents. Figure 1 shows the distribution of articles in the selected corpus by year of publication.

The graph suggests a significantly increasing interest in religious change from 2004 to 2013 followed by a slight decline in production until 2022. However, it is important to note that older articles may be underrepresented in the database due to the continuous updating and expansion of citation databases.

## Text Pre-processing and Operationalization

After downloading all 1638 articles, text elements are extracted from the files. The text is processed and normalized by removing the "s" suffix and reducing words to the lower case. Words are stemmed, i.e., variations of the same word are reduced to their root form. Numbers, punctuation, html strings, and the so-called stop words, namely, a standard list of generic words that occur frequently, such as “the”, “and”, “a”, are removed. Then, removing the most commonly occurring words, such as “religion” and “secularization” and their variations, is recommended to improve the clarity of topic modeling results. They are deleted since they cannot add much for the generation of topics and their interpretation. Moreover, words related to publishing information or online addresses and downloading (e.g., “jstor”, “jssr”, “http”) are also discarded. Finally, looking at the frequency of words, those who appear less than 5 times in the corpus are also eliminated. After several attempts,

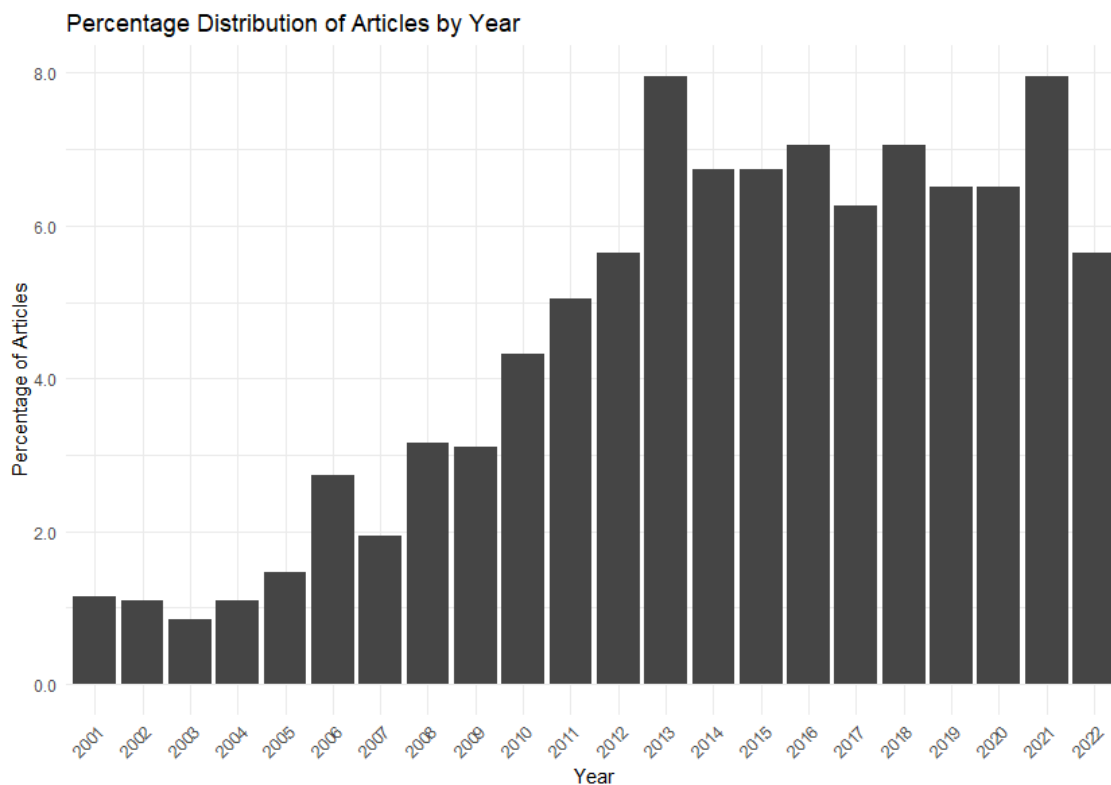


Figure 2.1: Distribution of the academic articles included in the corpus by publication year (as percentage of the total), Scopus. N = 1638

country names are removed from the text as well to uncover the underlying thematic structure of the corpus. This step was essential as the inclusion of country names would have overshadowed the latent theoretical and conceptual differences within the topics discussed.

The texts are then matched, through an ID, with the metadata of the articles, including name of author(s), country of institutional affiliation, year of publication, citation count and name of the journal. Metadata are automatically downloaded from Scopus for each article, but some recoding was required. The variable “country” is determined based on the institutional affiliation address of the authors. If an author has multiple affiliations, only the first listed affiliation is considered. The affiliation country of the author is then recoded as to differentiate between different geographical areas: Southern, Eastern, Central, Western and Northern Europe, UK/Ireland, South and North America, Africa, Asia, MENA region and Oceania<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Specifically, Italy, Spain, Malta and Portugal are recoded as “South EU”; Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Greece, and Montenegro are recoded as “East EU”; Germany, Slovenia, Switzerland, Croatia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, Czech Republic and Poland are recoded as “Central EU”; France, Netherlands, and Belgium are recoded as “West EU”, UK and Ireland are recoded as “UK/Ireland” and Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark are recoded as “North EU”; United States and Canada are recoded as “North America”; Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominica, Mexico, Colombia

To control for journal quality, the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) is downloaded from the Scimago portal. SJR is a measure of the academic influence of a journal, calculated by considering both the number of citations and the prestige of the journals citing an article. Publication year, citation count of the article and journal quality are mean-centered for regression analysis. To distinguish between disciplinary fields, the names of journals are classified into 11 categories according to the journal classification in the Scimago portal: sociology, religious studies, philosophy, psychology, history, economics, anthropology, political science, education, law, geography.

Finally, to account for contextual influence on the authors' production, a measure of country religiosity is added (again, based on the institutional affiliation of the author). The index is developed through individual survey data from the joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 dataset (EVS/WVS, 2022). Factor analysis is performed on the following items: importance of religion (ranging from 1 to 4); church attendance (ranging from 1 to 7); frequency of pray (ranging from 1 to 8); and a set of items on the belief in God, hell, heaven, and life after death (ranging from 0 to 1 each). The religiosity scale is constructed through factor scores (regression method). Subsequently, the average religiosity per country is calculated by aggregating the religiosity scores for each country. Table 2.2 shows descriptive statistics of the articles' metadata.

## Discovering latent themes through topic models

The corpus of journal articles is analyzed through Structural Topic Modeling (STM), an exploratory machine learning technique that identifies the latent thematic structure underlying a set of documents (Blei, 2012; DiMaggio et al., 2013; Evans & Aceves, 2016; Molina & Garip, 2019). Topic models serve as dimension-reduction techniques, transforming large textual information into a concise set of topics while identifying the underlying concepts in an inductive and automated way. The theoretical assumption behind the method is that text documents are related to a few topics and a topic of conversation is assumed to be made of a constellation of words that tend to be discussed together more often than otherwise would have happened by chance (Blei, 2012). And since the same word may refer to different topics, topic models allow a word to be associated with several topics depending on its co-occurrence.

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as "South America"; Australia and New Zealand as "Oceania"; Turkey, Emirates, Qatar, Israel, Lebanon, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Egypt as "MENA"; and Singapore, India, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Pakistan, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Macau, Korea, Taiwan and Kazakhstan as "Asia"; and Nigeria, Ghana, Botswana, Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya as "Africa".

Table 2.2: Data Description ( $N = 1638$ )

Variable	Category	Mean	St. Dev.	%	(N)
Country	North America			22.10	362
	Central EU			16.73	274
	UK/Ireland			15.26	250
	West EU			10.07	165
	South EU			9.46	155
	Asia			5.07	83
	MENA			4.64	76
	North EU			4.52	74
	East EU			4.27	70
	South America			3.48	57
	Oceania			2.99	49
	Africa			1.40	23
	Subject	Sociology			24.91
Religious Studies				23.87	391
Philosophy				14.83	243
Anthropology				7.81	128
Political Science				6.90	113
History				4.82	79
Geography				4.27	70
Education				3.79	62
Economics				3.66	60
Psychology				3.05	50
Law				2.08	34
Language		English			86.08
	Spanish			5.62	92
	French			4.76	78
	German			3.54	58
Country (standardized)	Religiosity	-0.30	0.45		
Citation Count		11.64	20.42		
SJR		0.55	1.16		

The topic model used in this study is an unsupervised learning method that does not require prior human annotation or labeling, so the model is not “trained”. The absence of predefined categories generated from human coders is one of the advantages of topic models, together with its flexibility in allowing textual data to belong to multiple topics simultaneously. This capability enables topic models to organize large sets of documents in a coherent way, reducing the high costs associated with traditional manual coding methods (Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013). However, the output of a topic model is not a definitive mapping. In fact, interpretative work is still required to read and make sense of the output and to assign meaningful names to the topics (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Thus, rather than understanding topic models as automatic text analysis, researchers should use them to “identify the lens through which one can see that data most clearly” (DiMaggio et al., 2013, p. 582).

Structural Topic Modeling (STM) draws upon Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), the first and one of the most widespread topic model introduced by Blei et al. (2003). Both STM and LDA discover hidden (latent) topics in a set of text documents by inferring possible topics based on the words in the documents. The input of the model is the document-term matrix containing the frequency of unique words appearing in each journal article. One of the assumptions of topic models is to treat documents as “bag of words”, meaning that the occurrence of words is captured without considering words’ embeddedness within the text or language complexities, such as, syntax, order of the words, and narrative. Topic models finally produce two outputs: the topic-word distribution, that is, the probability of each word occurring in each topic and the document-topic distribution, which represents the probability of each topic occurring in each document. These distributions provide insights into the underlying topics and their prevalence in the documents. However, the structure obtained is latent, meaning that high-probability words in each topic are not associated with an explicit topic label. By looking at the words with the highest probabilities, researchers could come up with what a human would call a “topic” or a “theme”.

The LDA algorithm operates by initially assigning random topics to words in each document and initializing topic-word and document-topic distributions. For each word in each document, it samples a new topic assignment, and it updates the two distributions. The estimation is based on the Dirichlet distribution which is a kind of multinomial distribution used as the prior distribution in Bayesian statistics. If we assume  $K$  topics to describe a set of documents, the mixture of topics in each document can be represented by a  $K$ -nomial distribution, which is a form of multinomial distribution with  $K$  possible outcomes.

STM relaxes some assumptions of the LDA method. Unlike LDA, which assumes

that topics are independent across documents, STM allows for correlations among topics. It also incorporates document-level covariates and metadata into the model, enabling the analysis of how specific variables influence topic prevalence or content (Roberts et al., 2016). This is particularly useful when studying academic journal articles that often address combinations of themes that are likely to co-occur, making the assumption of topic independence untenable (Marshall, 2013).

## Model Selection

In the STM framework, one of the challenges is determining the optimal number of topics. Following the recommendations in the literature (Weston et al., 2023) four diagnostic statistics are inspected: held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, exclusivity and residuals. We fitted 24 topic models (from 4- to 28-topic models). Figure 2.2 plots how these goodness-of-fit measures perform across the models with different numbers of topics.

Held-out likelihood is a measure that assesses a topic model’s ability to predict a test set after having been trained on a training set. The higher the held-out likelihood value, the better the model fits the unseen data. Residuals indicate discrepancies between observed and expected word frequencies, reflecting the theoretical multinomial error variance in a topic model. A residual variance exceeding one suggests the presence of more topics than currently estimated. Semantic coherence evaluates the internal coherence of topics by measuring how well the words within each topic are semantically related. It is calculated by considering pairs of words within a topic. For each word pair, it computes the co-occurrence probability, which represents how often the two words appear together in the corpus. The co-occurrence probability is compared to the probability of the individual words occurring independently, considering their overall frequencies. The semantic coherence score for a topic is the average of the co-occurrence probabilities across all word pairs in the topic. Higher coherence indicates that the words within a topic are more strongly associated with each other, reflecting a more coherent and interpretable topic. On the other hand, exclusivity measures the extent to which topics differ from each other. Exclusivity measures the distinctiveness of the words in each topic compared to other topics. It quantifies how much a word is uniquely associated with a particular topic and not commonly found in other topics. To calculate exclusivity, the algorithm considers the frequency of each word within a topic and compares it to the frequency of the same word across all other topics. The exclusivity score for a word in a topic is based on the difference between its frequency in the topic and its average frequency across other topics. Higher exclusivity suggests that

the topics are more distinct and represent different aspects or themes. Thus, models with higher held-out likelihood, high semantic coherence and exclusivity, and low residuals are considered to have better fit to the data. Based on the plot, it appears that models with the number of topics between 10 and 15 demonstrate relatively high goodness-of-fit measures.

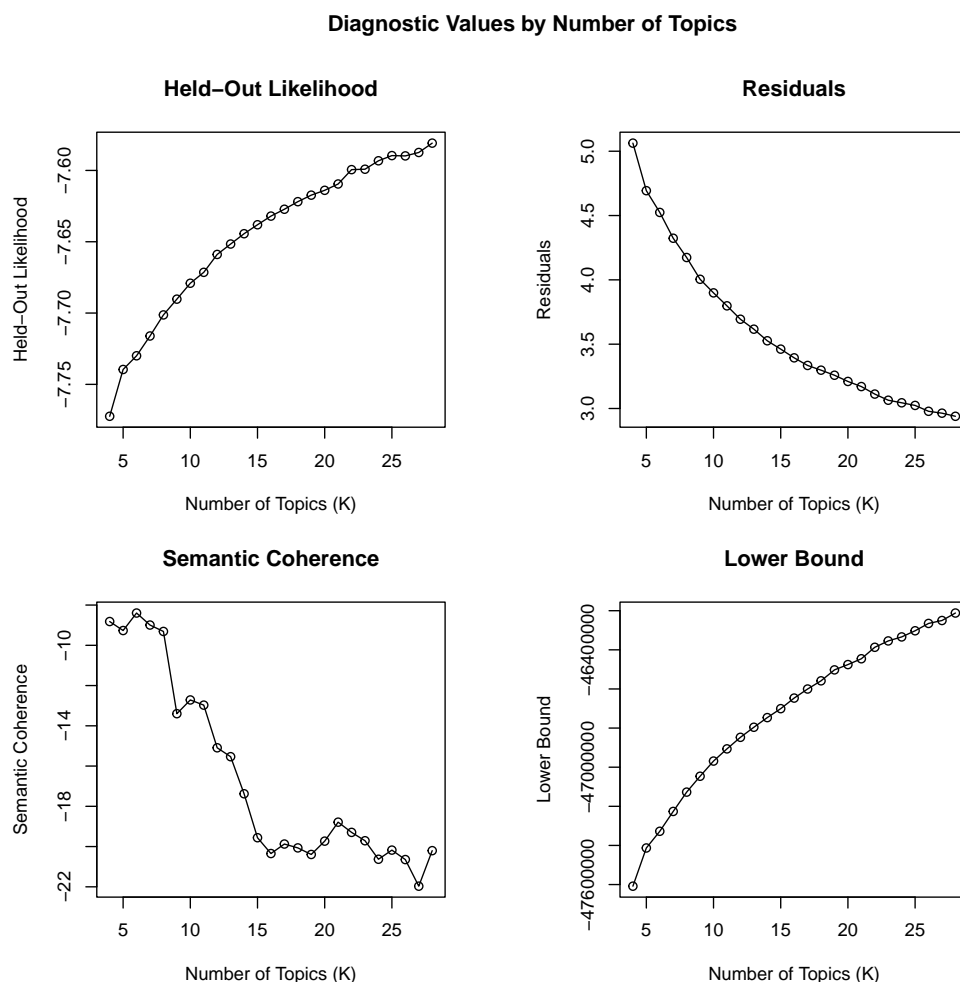


Figure 2.2: Model fit statistics for determining the number of topics.

While these four diagnostics offer valuable criteria for model selection, they do not unanimously establish clear thresholds for determining the number of topics. It is crucial to recognize that optimizing these measures may not necessarily enhance the substantive interpretation of the model (Kim et al., 2020). For this reason, models with 10 to 15 topics are separately estimated to make an informed decision about the optimal number of topics. After obtaining these models, a subjective evaluation is conducted to assess the interpretability of the topics. This evaluation involves examining the words associated with each topic and inspecting the texts that are most representative of each topic. In this evaluation, the goal is to

determine whether the topics contain substantially meaningful concepts that are distinguishable from each other. From this evaluation, the model with 13 topics is selected as the most suitable choice. Models with fewer topics tend to condense many semantically different themes, while models with a higher number of topics appear to introduce more arbitrariness in clustering words.

## 2.4 Limitations

There are multiple layers of limitations in the sample selection and the applied methodology. The primary constraint pertains to the article selection process, which cannot encompass all articles studying religious change, as many critics of the secularization thesis may choose not to use this term in their titles, abstracts, or keywords. Instead, they might opt for alternative terminology such as “multiple secularities”, “spiritual revolution”, and “individualization”. Consequently, the analyzed academic literature constitutes only a segment of the broader universe of publications addressing secularization, albeit a broad query is used to prevent the exclusion of relevant sources.

The second limitation concerns the accessibility and representativeness of the literature utilized. The analysis exclusively relies on research articles, excluding other academic sources such as books, conference papers, and editorial notes. This selection is driven by the need to employ comparable sources in terms of content, length, and structure to ensure consistent results. Additionally, the application of a computational technique necessitates the use of solely digitized research articles within the chosen database. Moreover, the limited linguistic scope of the corpus, restricted to English, Spanish, French, and German, may affect the results by overemphasizing Western-centric perspectives. While this choice reflects the linguistic composition of the database, the inclusion of underrepresented languages would have prevented reliable estimation in subsequent regression analyses.

A final limitation concerns the employed methodology and its inherent trade-offs. Topic models offer insights into a large number of research articles, avoiding the high cost of time associated with manual analysis. However, while the output of topic modeling provides valuable information on the document collection’s structure, it allows for multiple interpretations rather than presenting a definitive mapping of the texts’ meanings. Furthermore, the procedures for conducting topic modeling have yet to be fully standardized, and this absence of a gold standard complicates the validation and replication of findings (Chen et al., 2023). A possible methodological advancement for future analyses of semantic and linguistic trends in secularization

and religious change is represented by Large Language Models (LLMs). Recent advances in LLMs offer promising tools for text analysis and annotation that may soon outperform other machine learning techniques such as topic modeling (Gilardi et al., 2023).

## 2.5 Results

Table 3 presents the identified topics along with their associated FREX words. FREX words are those that are both frequent and exclusive, meaning they are characteristic and distinctive to each topic (Roberts et al., 2019). These words are crucial in distinguishing and defining the topics. Additionally, each topic is associated with the expected proportion of the text corpus it represents, providing an understanding of the prevalence or importance of each theme within the overall corpus. The topic names, shown in the "Topic" column of the table, were selected to best capture the substantive meaning of each theme. These names were derived by examining the top 15 FREX words for each topic and reviewing the articles in which each topic was strongly represented. Through this process, certain thematic elements emerge, reflecting themes related to different levels of analysis, theoretical perspectives, and diverse religious communities. While some topics blend aspects of multiple dimensions, certain distinctions allow for more nuanced interpretation. To systematize these themes, a column "Cluster" is added to the table. This process is guided by an interpretative analysis of each topic. The following paragraphs aim to describe these clusters and the contents of the associated topics.

### **Science, Politics, Education and Law: Secularization as Institutional Differentiation**

Secularization can refer to the institutional differentiation of religion from other aspects of life. Although research blends various levels of analysis and no strong distinctions can be traced, five topics seem to refer to a macro dimension of the secularization thesis. They resemble the topics of institutional differentiation identified by Gorski & Altınordu (2008) in the specialized literature: religion and education, law and secularism, religion and politics and the history of science, medicine and the professions. Topic "Science" unfolds in investigations related to religion-science conflict narratives, the (non-)religious diversity among scientists, and (counter-)stereotypical identities in science and religion. Topic "Catholicism/Politics" delves into the intricate interplay between religion and politics, exploring voting preferences, religion and national identities, and the persistent usage of religion among political parties,

Table 2.3: Topics with highest FREX words and topics' proportions in the corpus

Cluster	Topic	FREX Words	Proportion
INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL	Science	scientist, scienc, scientif, atheism, term, oup, evolutionari, technolog, biolog, deg, cognit, disciplin, theistic, evolut, intellig	0.04
	Education	teacher, pupil, curriculum, school, student, educ, faculti, room, dialogu, catech, campus, classroom, teach, swedish, ministri	0.05
	Law	court, legal, law, rawls, legisl, suprem, conscienc, blasphem, liberti, amend, motto, hobbes, crimin, freedom, supra	0.06
	Institutions	spiritu, prison, chaplain, patient, mediat, health, psycholog, mental, heal, emot, compass, chaplainci, hospit, care, die	0.07
INDIVIDUAL LEVEL	Quantitative Studies	cohort, variabl, regress, coeffici, incom, index, estim, inglehart, dummi, correl, hypothesis, rate, varianc, norri, voa	0.10
	Family	gender, fertil, femal, parent, young, adolesc, women, immigr, youth, marri, male, adult, sampl, sexual, famili	0.08
THEORIES	Sociological Theories	habermas, berger, durkheim, postsecular, luckmann, differeti, beck, casanova, sociolog, parsons, weber, modern, luhmann, thesi, paradigm	0.12
	Philosophical Theories	vattimo, metaphys, arendt, heidegger, agamben, hegel, benjamin, girard, schmitt, blumenberg, voegelin, nietzsche, philosoph, gauchet, kant	0.11
	Supply-side Theories	welfare, mea, market, internet, consum, capit, chariti, network, neoliber, consumpt, economi, charit, product, worker, organiz	0.06
RELIGIONS	Catholicism / Politics	catholic, mep, roc, cleavag, elector, anticler, vatican, vote, communist, chile, latin, socialist, cathol, bishop, parti	0.09
	Protestantism	pentecost, anglican, london, congreg, charismat, brown, christendom, rowntre, sydney, ecumen, methodist, femin, sunday, presbyterian, tweet	0.07
	Islam	islamist, islam, arab, muslim, ottoman, mosqu, nationalist, sunni, akp, imam, ali, halal, ulama, sharia, brotherhood	0.09
	Asian Religions	cemeteri, templ, shrine, festiv, lama, tattoo, deceas, villag, funer, dalai, commemor, mum, ritual, buddhist, tibet	0.06

particularly in regions with a Catholic majority such as Southern European and Latin American countries. In topic “Law” scholars examine secularization from a legal standpoint, probing the relationship between the state and religion. Articles within this topic raise questions about the role of religion in liberal democracies, considering constitutional and legal ramifications, as well as concepts of religious freedom amid religious pluralism. Topic “Education” discusses state and religious education, the integration of religious diversity within educational institutions and public policy initiatives, with a specific focus on the European landscape. It is highlighted, for example, how governments, at the macro level, have assumed responsibility for the education of citizens, or how educational institutions which were once religious have now relegated religion to the margins. A more general topic called “Institutions” deals with the institutional regulation of religion across various sociocultural and legal contexts, highlighting the negotiation between personal belief and institutional frameworks. Overall, this set of topics primarily refers to the institutional level and emphasizes how secularization has changed societal concerns as well as religious organizations’ functions and roles.

## **Beliefs, Behaviors and Belonging: Secularization as Religious Decline**

Another set of topics emphasizes religious beliefs, practices, and affiliation at the individual level. Topics “Quantitative Studies” and “Family” investigate trends in religiosity, often within the classical framework of the religious decline thesis. They investigate not only declining rates in beliefs and practices but also the changing behaviors and the changing transmission of religion. Topic “Quantitative Studies” encompasses empirical articles that utilize quantitative methodologies to examine evolving trends in religious participation and affiliation, with a focus on the United States and Canada. Articles within this topic utilize survey data, often employing longitudinal or multilevel perspectives. They test demand and supply-side theories of religious pluralism, investigate trends in religious affiliation, participation, or polarization, and frequently confirm the classical hypothesis of religious decline. Topic “Family” delves into the sociological consequences of increasing unbelief and disaffiliation, especially among women and young people. Topics deal with gender differences in religiosity, variations in sexual behaviors, and shifts in fertility rates, alongside changes in religiosity patterns among the youth and the transmission of religious beliefs across generations.

## **Supply-side and Post-Modernist Theories: Challenges to the Secularization Thesis**

A further group of topics refers to arguments and theories mainly critical of secularization. A first topic discusses “Sociological Theories” of secularization, presenting articles that evaluate the dominant narratives of secularization while also developing theories on processes such as differentiation, polarization, religious pluralism, post-secularity, and re-sacralization. This topic engages with classical sociological theorists like Durkheim, Berger, Luhmann, and Habermas and considers both supportive and critical theories of secularization. Indeed, secularization is a contested theory, and many of the specialized literature and streams of research devoted to criticizing it emerge from topics “Supply-Side Theories” and “Philosophical Theories”. The former defines the literature around economic theories of religion and secularization. Articles within this topic employ a rational choice theory framework, examining the relationship between religion and development, along with the organizational structure of faith-based institutions. Meanwhile, the latter encompasses philosophical and theological discourses and post-modernist theoretical critiques. Articles delve into hermeneutics, metaphysics, theological discussions on secularization, and genealogical critiques, discussing authors such as Vattimo, Agamben and Girard.

## **Christianity, Islam, and Asian Religions: Religious Communities in the Secularization Debate**

Further distinctions emerge in the examination of the various religious traditions within the corpus. Topic called “Islam” scrutinizes Islam and its interaction with secularization within Muslim-majority nations, shedding light on the role of religion in the process of state secularization and democratization. Meanwhile, “Asian Religions” topic delves into popular religious customs, traditional rituals, and festivals, along with Eastern beliefs and practices. This topic explores the revival and re-enchantment of local religious traditions, as well as the proliferation of Asian religions, such as Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Europe and its evolution within South-East Asia. “Catholicism” focuses on particularly within European and Latin American contexts, while Topic “Protestantism” focuses on the development of Protestant churches and movements with a particular emphasis on Britain. Interestingly, themes related to Catholicism appear to be discussed together with politics. Also worth noticing is the frequency of the topics. Among these four themes, the most discussed in the literature are the ones related to Catholicism and Islam. This

might suggest that, contrary to expectations, Islam is far from being a neglected category in the study of religious change.

As a further analysis, we explored the distribution of these clusters across the main disciplinary fields and geographical locations of the author as shown in Figure 2.3. For clarity, we focused on the most common categories: geographical areas were simplified into North America, Europe, and a combined category for other regions, while the disciplinary fields highlighted include Sociology, Religious Studies, Anthropology, and Philosophy, which are the most represented in the corpus. The graph shows how the individual dimension of secularization —mainly driven by quantitative articles on the decline of religious practices and beliefs and its consequences at the individual level—is predominantly addressed by North American scholars, followed by European ones and published in sociological journals. In contrast, interest in the "institutional" aspects of secularization shows a more balanced spread across both geographical regions and academic fields. Discussions on the theoretical aspects of secularization are less common in North American scholarship, appearing more frequently in philosophy journals, followed closely by sociology journals. Additionally, topics related to specific religious traditions are less prominent in North American and European research, being more concentrated in publications from other regions and anthropology-related journals.

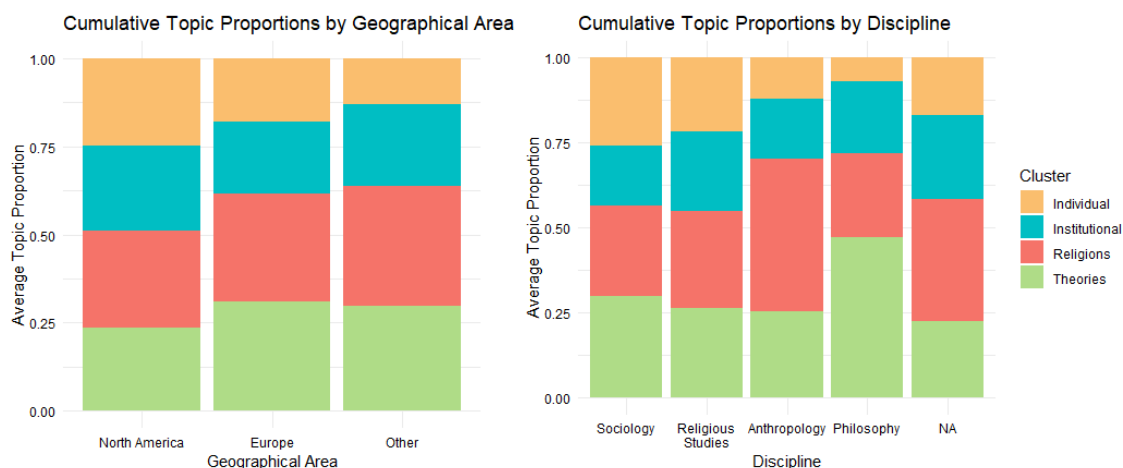


Figure 2.3: Average Topic Distribution by geographical area of authors and disciplinary field

## Is the Secularization Debate Characterized by Parochial Concerns?

Using the four topics picturing different religious communities, a cross-national comparison is advanced to test institutional parochialism, meaning the tendency to study one’s own communities, within the contemporary scholarship of the secularization debate. The model is built upon linear regression, where the outcome is the proportion of each document associated with different topics. Notably, these proportions sum to 1 within each document, indicating their compositional nature. Consequently, the proportions of different topics within a document are interdependent, meaning that changes in the proportion of one topic will inevitably influence the proportions of other topics. To accurately capture these interrelationships and avoid biased interpretations, the regression function utilized within STM incorporates the compositional structure of the data and addresses correlations among topics using the method of composition and by estimating different models for each topic. This is essential as neglecting these correlations may lead to biased or misleading results<sup>5</sup>. Results of the full model can be found in the Appendix (Table 2.4). Figure 2.4 shows the estimated topic proportions for each selected topic by different geographical origin of the author, controlling for publication year, discipline, country religiosity, language of publication, citation count and journal ranking. Numeric variables such as year of publication and citation count are centered in the analysis.

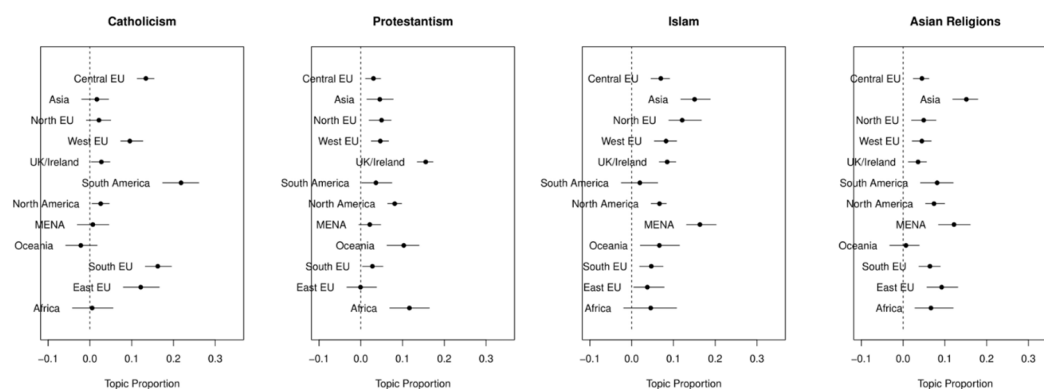


Figure 2.4: Average Predicted Topic Proportions for Topics “Catholicism”, “Protestantism”, “Islam”, and “Asian Religions” for Each Geographical Region

When examining topics that distinguish religious traditions, the findings suggest that scholars tend to study topics that are closely related to their own societies.

<sup>5</sup>The estimation is performed using the "estimateEffect" function from the stm package which provides a specialized approach in the stm package. The "estimateEffect" function offers several advantages in analyzing the STM model, including handling measurement uncertainty, addressing the specific properties of compositional data, and accounting for topic correlations.

For example, authors based in South Europe and South America, followed by the rest of continental Europe, address Catholicism in their writings more often than their colleagues, indicating a significant interest in issues that are culturally close. Similarly, UK and Ireland-based scholars tend to focus on Protestant churches in Britain. Both scholars affiliated with Asian institutions and located in the MENA region show a tendency to study topics connected to Asian religions, New Religious Movements, and Islam, reflecting their geographical proximity and cultural ties. Nevertheless, these two topics exhibit a more widespread geographical distribution in the literature, as the topics interest not only Eastern scholars and researchers from the Middle East. For example, the topic of Islam appears to be discussed by North European researchers as well.

Examining the remaining coefficients in the full model in the appendix, several results can be highlighted. The study of trends in religious participation and affiliation through quantitative techniques appears to be mainly addressed by North American researchers as well as the topic related to science and religion. Sociology is the discipline in which topics related to the sociological theories of secularization and the quantitative analysis of religious change exhibit a greater prevalence compared to other disciplines. The theme on spirituality is predominantly addressed in psychology, while articles addressing economic models of religion are found in journals of economic disciplines more frequently. Islam is predominantly studied in anthropology and political sciences rather than sociology. An analysis of coefficients related to the religiosity of countries reveals that authors situated in more religious nations tend to direct their focus toward topics associated with Islam. Conversely, authors affiliated with less religious countries demonstrate a greater inclination to engage with subjects concerning Eastern religions and New Religious Movements. Examining the coefficients of citation count and journal impact factor reveals that quantitative studies on secularization tend to be published in higher-ranked journals and receive more citations. Conversely, topics related to philosophy, Catholicism, and law receive significantly fewer citations. Additionally, the topic of science and religion is often found in lower-ranked journals.

## 2.6 Conclusions

How is secularization discussed in the academic debate? Many are the attempts produced to systematize the highly contested debate on secularization. This work aims to shed light on the main topics addressed in the literature by means of Structural Topic Modeling (STM), a machine learning technique used to identify latent

themes across 1638 journal articles published in the last two decades addressing the topic of secularization. The 13 topics extracted differentiate the debate along macro and micro levels of analysis, focusing on different theoretical perspectives and emphasizing different cultural and religious traditions. The first group of topics refers to the institutional level of secularization, identifying four main themes: science, education, politics, and law. The topics resemble the specialized literatures found by Gorski and Altınordu (2008) and focus on the transformation of secular and religious institutions faced with secularization. A second group relates secularization to its individual dimension, exploring, through quantitative analysis, changing trends in individual religiosity, like the declining rates of religious practices and affiliations, and the evolving dynamics resulting from it, such as shifts in fertility rates, sexual behaviors, and patterns of religious transmission. Findings on these two topics confirm that a substantial portion of secularization research at the individual level is dominated by quantitative analyses and predominantly focuses on Western societies, particularly North America, within the context of Christian religions (Stolz, 2020). Most of these studies defend the classical thesis of religious decline confirming that quantitative research on secularization largely operates within a neoclassical framework aimed at uncovering the mechanisms behind the disappearance of religion. Notably, quantitative studies in the secularization research program seem to share a higher impact and relevance, having higher citation counts and getting published in higher-rank journals. The third group of topics diversifies theoretical perspectives and critiques. In addition to traditional sociological debates on religious change, the topic model output highlights critical viewpoints, such as economic models of religion, privatization and spiritualization of religion, and post-modernist philosophical critiques. Sociological and philosophical arguments are the most frequent topics in the whole literature. Finally, the fourth group of topics defines different religious traditions, namely, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Asian Religions. Interestingly, in the secularization literature, these religious traditions are discussed in different ways. For example, both Islam and Catholicism are mainly discussed in their intertwining relation with politics. Articles dedicated to Islam investigate its role in shaping national identity in Muslim-majority countries, the relation between religion and the state, and the capacity of Muslim-majority states and Islam political parties to accommodate democratically secular and quasi-secular political systems.

Furthermore, the paper aimed to investigate whether scholars studying secularization have a preference towards matters of parochial concern. Regression analysis is used to test the hypothesis that researchers tend to study religious communities that are culturally close to them. Findings suggest that researchers indeed exhibit a tendency to study their own communities, especially when we consider European

and American researchers studying Christian denominations. However, this pattern does not seem to hold true for issues related to Islam and Muslim countries and Asian religions, as their scholarly interests extend beyond Middle East and Asian borders to reach European countries. Indeed, inspecting the topic of Islam, it seems that the articles included not only deal with the issue of Islam and modernity but also with the changing religious landscape of European countries in light of the migration phenomenon from Muslim-majority nations. Similarly, the topic concerning Asian Religions explores the assimilation of Eastern traditions in Western contexts.

Overall, results contribute to empirically confirming some aspects of academic self-criticism while challenging others. They suggest a research agenda characterized by diverse interests in cultural areas, not only isolated to Christian communities, but also reaching Islam, Asian religions, and New Religious Movements. However, the vast majority of the academic literature sampled in this study is produced by scholars located in Western countries. Specifically, only about 15% of the literature is produced by authors located in the Global South. Thus, the result showing Islam and Eastern religions as less parochial might be driven by the underrepresentation of non-Western scholars. Indeed, as mentioned more thoroughly in the limitations, the selection of articles investigated may be distorted in terms of language, journal coverage, and data availability. Results need to be interpreted with caution due to the limited linguistic scope of the corpus. Non-European languages remain underrepresented in major bibliographic databases such as Scopus. A more robust test of institutional parochialism would benefit from the inclusion of additional languages, such as Arabic and Turkish. Still, investigating the content and the geographical spread of the literature on a highly debated topic such as secularization can help us in identifying current and future trends, and efforts to diversify the study of religious change both in the content and in the scholars participating in the conversation. The parochialism of the social sciences has been largely debated, with empirical evidence found in the study of religion as well (Poulson & Campbell, 2010). The issue becomes increasingly pressing as the academic enterprise moves towards its expansions and internationalization, broadening not only geographical boundaries, but also cultural, religious and linguistic ones.

## 2.7 Appendix

Table 2.4: Regression results of the 13 topics on year, author's country, subject of the journal, country religiosity, language, citation count and journal impact factor. Observations: 1638. Unstandardized results. \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001.

	Science	Supply-Side	Sociological	Islam	Institutions	Philosophical	Asian	Quantitative	Catholicism /	Law	Family	Protestantism	Education
		Theories	Theories			Theories	Religions	Studies	Politics				
Year (centered)	.00	-.00	-.00	-.00	.00	-.00	.00	.00***	-.00**	-.00*	.00**	-.00*	.00
<i>Country (ref.: North America)</i>													
Africa	-.06**	.04	.05	-.02	.00	-.01	-.01	-.11**	-.02	.02	.05	.04	.04
Asia	-.04***	.02	.02	.09***	-.01	-.02	.08***	-.08***	-.01	.02	-.03	-.03*	.02
Central EU	-.06***	-.01	.03	.00	.00	-.01	-.03*	-.03	.11***	-.02*	.06***	-.05***	.00
East EU	-.06***	.06***	.04	-.03	.01	.01	.02	-.04	.10***	-.01	.00	-.08***	-.02
MENA	-.05***	.01	.02	.10***	-.01	.02	.05**	-.06**	-.02	.02	-.01	-.06***	-.01
North EU	-.06***	.08***	.01	.05*	.00	-.01	-.03	-.10***	-.01	-.00	.01	-.03	.09***
Oceania	.01	.03	-.01	-.00	.05*	.04	-.07**	-.06*	-.05*	.01	.03	.02	-.00
South America	-.05***	-.01	.04	-.04	.00	-.07*	-.01	-.06*	.19***	.04*	.01	-.04*	-.01
South EU	-.06***	-.02	.02	-.02	.02	-.02	-.01	-.04*	.14***	.00	.04*	-.05***	-.00
UK/Ireland	-.04***	.01	.02	.02	.02	-.00	-.04**	-.09***	.00	-.01	.03*	.08***	-.00
West EU	-.04***	.00	-.02	.01	.03*	.03	-.03*	-.05*	.07***	-.01	.01	-.04**	.02
<i>Journal (ref.: Sociology)</i>													
Anthropology	-.01	-.01	-.08***	.07***	.00	.01	.10***	-.09***	.03*	.01	-.03	.01	-.00
Economics	-.02	.09***	-.11***	-.01	-.01	-.02	.03	.13***	-.04	.00	-.02	-.02	-.01
Education	-.00	-.05**	-.07**	-.03	-.02	-.00	-.04*	-.07**	-.02	.02	-.02	-.02	.35***
Geography	-.02	.01	-.03	-.01	-.01	.05*	.08***	-.11***	.09***	.00	-.08***	.03	-.01
History	.00	-.02	-.10***	-.00	-.03	.07***	-.01	-.10***	.08***	.03*	-.08***	.17***	-.01
Law	-.02	-.04	-.05	.01	-.03	.01	-.03	-.08**	-.03	.40***	-.09***	-.03	-.02
Philosophy	.00	-.01	-.04**	-.02	.01	.20***	-.02	-.10***	-.02	.03**	-.06***	.03**	-.00
Political Science	-.03**	-.02	-.08***	.15***	-.03	-.01	-.02	-.00	.09***	.04***	-.07***	-.02	-.01
Psychology	.03*	-.04*	-.11***	-.06*	.18***	-.01	-.02	.02	-.01	-.03	.07**	-.04*	-.00
Religious Studies	.01	-.01	-.05***	-.00	.02*	.04**	-.01	-.01	.02*	.00	-.03**	.01	.01
Country Religiosity	.00	.02*	-.02	.05***	.00	.01	-.05***	-.03*	.00	.01	.02	-.01	-.00
<i>Language (ref.: English)</i>													
French	-.02	-.01	.05*	-.06**	.01	.11***	.02	-.08***	.04*	.02	-.01	-.05**	-.02
German	-.01	-.02	.16***	-.06**	.01	.10***	.01	-.06*	-.04*	.01	-.08***	-.03	.00
Spanish	-.00	-.00	.07**	-.04	-.03	.16***	-.02	-.06*	.03	-.01	-.06**	-.03	-.02
Citation Count (centered)	-.00	.00	.00	-.00	.00	-.00**	-.00	.00***	-.00*	-.00*	.00	-.00	-.00
Impact Factor (centered)	.01***	-.00	-.01	-.00	-.01	-.00	-.00	.02***	.01	-.00	-.00	-.00	-.00
(Intercept)	.08***	.07***	.14***	.09***	.06***	.05***	.05***	.18***	.03**	.04***	.11***	.08***	.03***

## Chapter 3

# The Faith Factor. How Scholars' Religiosity Biases Research Findings on Secularization<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Secularization is one of the most debated areas of research in current sociology of religion. Despite hundreds of empirical studies, researchers do not even agree on the very existence of secularization in different parts of the world. This article investigates whether some of the variability in findings may be attributed not to the social reality investigated, but to bias in the form of researchers' own religiosity. Specifically, we test whether researchers' religiosity is correlated with two outcomes: their personal belief in the secularization thesis and the likelihood of supporting secularization in their published articles. To address this question, we constructed an international database of scholars working on secularization and conducted a survey measuring their religiosity and beliefs about religious decline. We then coded their publications according to whether they supported the secularization thesis and linked the two datasets. We find significant evidence of a “(non-)religious bias”. Either in their private attitudes or public writings, religious researchers find less evidence for the secularization thesis, while secular scholars find more. This result cannot be explained by differences in research methods, study quality, or the religious and geographic contexts under investigation.

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### 3.1 Introduction

The secularization thesis is one of the most enduringly contested topics in the sociology of religion. Sociological classics such as Max Weber (1904) or Émile Durkheim (1912) understood religion as antithetical to modernity and destined to disappear. Building on these authors, the secularization thesis emerged, linking modernization to the long-term decline of religion (Berger, 1967; Dobbelaere, 1981; Wilson, 1966). This view dominated the sociology of religion during most of the twentieth century. Starting from the 1980s, defenders of the individualization thesis and rational choice theorists sowed doubts on the disappearance of religion as an inherent feature of modernization processes. This debate has continued until today, with new defenders of secularization theory and new critics having emerged on the fore (Gauthier, 2020; Kasselstrand et al., 2023; Müller, 2020; Stolz, 2020; Voas, 2020).

The field has not been able to settle the debate on empirical grounds. Despite hundreds of empirical studies, researchers still do not agree whether secularization is occurring in various parts of the world—let alone whether modernization causally leads to secularization. One possibility is that these differences are not purely empirical but are influenced, at least in part, by researchers' own religiosity. Specifically, highly religious researchers might be so convinced of religion's enduring significance that they overlook signs of weakening faith in their studies. Conversely, strongly secular scholars might be so eager to find evidence of religious decline that they unintentionally exaggerate such trends. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has systematically examined the presence of this bias or its potential effects. This article examines whether and to what extent the variability in findings surrounding the secularization controversy can be attributed not to the social reality being studied, but to the religiosity of the researchers involved.

We constructed a database of international scholars in the social sciences engaged in the study of contemporary secularization, encompassing disciplines such as sociology, religious studies, political science, history, and anthropology. We then conducted a survey among these scholars to measure their religiosity and their belief in the secularization thesis. In the next step, we coded the articles of these scholars, both empirical and conceptual, published on the topic of secularization and religious change. Finally, we linked the two datasets of researchers' attitudes and coded publications. We performed logistic regression analysis to examine the effect of authors' religiosity on the two outcomes: (1) their personal belief in the secularization thesis and (2) the likelihood of finding evidence for secularization in their published work.

We find significant evidence of a “(non-)religious bias”. Both in their private attitudes and in their published work, religious researchers tend to see less evidence

for the secularization thesis, whereas secular scholars are more likely to affirm it. This result cannot be explained by differences in research methods—quantitative or qualitative—by variations in research impact, or by the specific religious traditions or geographical areas studied by the scholars.

## 3.2 Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

It is generally admitted that scientists should establish results independently of their personal beliefs or values (Merton, 1973). The idea is that if somebody else, with different orientations and attitudes, replicated the study, they would find the same results. This intersubjective validity and methodical control of results is what makes modern science scientific. At the same time, it is equally recognized that the complete exclusion of personal beliefs and values from the research process is extremely difficult, especially in the social sciences (Becker, 1967; Weber, 1949). The formulation of research questions, the choice of concepts, and the selection of methods are inevitably shaped by the researcher's theoretical orientation, worldview, and normative assumptions, which may in turn influence the results.

This debate has given rise to clashing epistemological and methodological positions within the social sciences. Post-positivists, while acknowledging the challenges, argue that scholars should nonetheless strive for neutrality in their pursuit of truth (King et al., 1994; Raub et al., 2022). Constructivists argue that instead of aiming for unattainable objectivity, researchers should acknowledge their positionality and engage in reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This debate remains ongoing (Burawoy, 2005; Hammersley, 2017). In this paper, we sidestep the abstract epistemological debate between post-positivism and constructivism about what researchers ought to do and rather ask empirically, whether researchers' beliefs and values actually correlate with their findings. Little empirical evidence exists testing the impact of ideological and moral values on research outcomes. Borjas & Breznau (2026) show that researchers' political ideology influences results in policy-relevant research on immigration. Sulik et al. (2024) report that scholars' cognitive traits and personality dimensions are correlated with preferences towards different schools of thought in psychology. Taken together, such findings suggest that academic disagreements on contentious topics cannot always be resolved by simply accumulating more evidence, as researchers may continue to hold fundamentally different positions despite exposure to the same data. To the best of our knowledge, no study to date has investigated whether religious beliefs may influence scientific conclusions about secularization.

## **The secularization debate: A controversy about findings and biases**

The debate on secularization in the social sciences of religion is vast, and here we can only highlight some of its most salient aspects (for a recent overview, see Stolz 2020). Classical secularization theory posits that modernization leads to a long-term decline in religion and religiosity (Wallis & Bruce, 1995). This perspective dominated the social sciences until the 1970s. From the 1980s onward, scholars increasingly challenged this thesis, advocating for a "change not decline" perspective. According to this view, while some forms of religion were indeed waning, others were emerging and expanding, offsetting these losses. Rational choice theorists, for instance, pointed to the growth of new religious movements and upstart sects—such as evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal groups (Finke & Stark, 1992; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). Meanwhile, proponents of the individualization thesis emphasized the rise of "diffused," "invisible," and "lived" religion—forms of less institutionalized but still socially significant religiosity (Ammerman, 2013; Cipriani, 2017; Davie, 1990, 1994; Hervieu-Léger, 2003; Luckmann, 1967). Others argued for a "spiritual revolution," suggesting that esoteric, holistic, and alternative spiritualities were on the rise (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Houtman & Aupers, 2007). Additionally, some scholars proposed the idea of "European exceptionalism," contending that secularization is largely confined to Western Europe, while religiosity remains strong elsewhere in the world (Berger et al., 2008; Davie, 2006).

Criticism of secularization research has extended beyond empirical concerns to its underlying assumptions. Hadden (1987, p. 588) described secularization theory as a "taken-for-granted ideology rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions". Similarly, Christiano et al. (2002) argued that the secularization thesis had itself become a kind of religion, with claims of religious decline reflecting the personal ideological views of scholars rather than objective analysis. On the other side of the dispute, defenders of the classical secularization thesis responded to these critiques by arguing that the observed growth of new religious movements, upstart sects, and spirituality is insufficient to compensate for the decline of mainstream religions (Pollack & Pickel, 2007). Research has shown how religiosity is declining across generations, with each new cohort being less religious than the previous one (Molteni & Biolcati, 2023; Voas & Chaves, 2016). They viewed spirituality only as an intermediate phase between religiosity and secularity (Voas, 2009). While acknowledging that Western contexts have historically been overrepresented in studies, secularization defenders argued that an increasing body of quantitative research on non-Western societies continues to support the modernization-secularization link

(Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Stolz et al., 2023). Finally, they argued that religious and spiritual beliefs are weakening in substance, salience, and strength among affiliated and disaffiliated alike, disproving arguments of invisible religion (Voas, 2025). Secularization scholars accused their critics of harboring their own ideological biases. They charged “change-not-decline” scholars with assuming that religion is a natural and universal phenomenon with inherently positive effects on civic life (Dromi & Stabler, 2023). Moreover, they claimed that their adversaries were “moving the goalpost”: as soon as one of their counterexamples to secularization was disproved, they pointed to another one that allegedly showed the vitality of religion (Kasselstrand et al., 2023, p. 43).

### **How (non-)religiosity can bias beliefs and research conclusions on secularization**

In this study, we investigate how religiosity and secularity may bias two types of interlinked outcomes: the belief in the validity of the secularization thesis and the support found for secularization in researchers' publications. Religiosity or secularity may influence the belief in the validity of the secularization thesis in an *implicit* way. One possible mechanism is scholars' embeddedness in religiously homogeneous social environments. Religious scholars might be more often surrounded by individuals with similar levels of religiosity, which may make it difficult for them to imagine that religion is in decline. Conversely, secular scholars may tend to interact primarily with other non-religious individuals and may therefore find it equally hard to conceive that religion could persist or even thrive.

Similarly, religiosity or secularity can impact research practices and inferences through unconscious cognitive biases. Human judgment is inherently fallible, and systematic patterns such as confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and blind spot bias can distort the research process (Bishop, 2020). Studies on scientific reasoning show that researchers are more likely to accept evidence that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs while dismissing contradictory findings (Hom & Van Nuland, 2019; Masnick & Zimmerman, 2009). Religious and secular worldviews may also unconsciously shape which questions scholars ask, how they measure concepts, and how they interpret results (Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020; Rooney, 1992). This bias extends even to the evaluation of research quality: studies that challenge a scholar's worldview may be perceived as less methodologically rigorous, even when they adhere to the same empirical standards (Munro et al., 2004). Consequently, religious scholars might be more receptive to evidence contradicting secularization, while secular scholars might be more inclined to confirm it.

Beyond these implicit mechanisms, religiosity and secularity may also shape research practices in more *deliberate* ways. Scholars may engage in activist research that either defends or challenges religion's role in contemporary society. For example, religious scholars may consciously avoid emphasizing religious decline, whether due to personal convictions or institutional pressures. Conversely, secular scholars may exaggerate or overstate religious decline to advance a secularist agenda. Building on these insights, we posit the following two hypotheses:

*H1: The higher the religiosity of a scholar, the lower their likelihood of believing in the validity of the secularization thesis.*

*H2: The higher the religiosity of a scholar, the lower their likelihood of supporting secularization in their published research.*

We investigate these hypotheses while adjusting for three potential confounders: methodological preferences, research context, and research impact. First, the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods may function as a confounder. Quantitative researchers may be more likely than qualitative researchers to find evidence of secularization. This is partly because quantitative studies can more readily adopt a longitudinal perspective, making religious decline easier to detect. They also tend to rely on traditional indicators of religiosity—such as church attendance or formal affiliation—which are especially likely to capture the decline of institutionalized religion (Houtman et al., 2012). By contrast, qualitative approaches are often better suited to studying minority groups and holistic forms of spirituality, which can highlight religious persistence and transformation rather than decline. At the same time, selection effects may also be at play: for instance, more religiously committed scholars may have been disproportionately drawn to qualitative methods. In such a situation, the relationship between religiosity and scholarly findings on secularization could not be accurately assessed without accounting for the confounding influence of methodological orientation. Second, the religious tradition under study and the geographical area investigated may also act as confounders. For example, researchers who work in Western Europe, or mainline Christianity (or both), are more likely to encounter secularization than researchers who work on Africa, or Pentecostalism (or both), due to the differing religious trends in these contexts (Stolz & Novak, 2023). Relatedly, researchers may have personal or regional ties to the traditions they study, which could subtly shape their interpretations. Thus, those working in predominantly secular or religious contexts may risk overgeneralizing the religious trends of their specific area. Finally, research quality may moderate the way religiosity can influence both beliefs about and findings on secularization.

One may expect that higher research quality would mitigate biases.

### **3.3 Data, Method and Measures**

#### **Creating a list of scholars working on secularization and their publications**

In the first step, we created a list of scholars working on secularization, as well as a matched list of their publications. The target population of the study is made up of scholars who conducted research on secularization in the decade 2011-2020. They were identified through a bibliographic search on the Web of Science Core Collection<sup>2</sup>. Web of Science ensures coverage of research publications and citations, enabling the user to advance high-quality and consistent bibliographic research. The complete list of all the research articles written in English about “secularization” or “secularisation” — this accounts for linguistic differences between American and British English — was retrieved. This query is applied to the title, abstract, author’s keywords, and “keyword plus” — a list of index terms automatically generated from the titles of cited articles. The result of this search, as of February 2021, retrieved a list of 1664 articles and 2015 authors and co-authors, and their meta-information, such as year of publication, authors’ institutional affiliation, emails, and research category. An online search was conducted for each author to check the accuracy of the institutional email, and we got an updated one in case it had changed. At the end of this work, after checking all the initial data set by eliminating 13 duplicates, finding 22 authors who passed away in the meanwhile, and discarding 33 authors for whom no email was found, the final list of participants who received an invitation to complete the survey consisted of 1947 authors.

#### **Administering an online survey to scholars working on secularization**

An online survey was administered to the 1947 scholars found in step 1, between April 30th and June 8th, 2021. 954 academics answered the survey, equivalent to a 49% response rate. Of these 954, 111 were excluded, since they did not answer "yes" to the initial mandatory filter question “Is religion one of your research in-

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<sup>2</sup>The Web of Science Core Collection database includes the following indexes: Science Citation Index Expanded (1980-present); Social Sciences Citation Index (1980-present); Arts & Humanities Citation Index (1980-present); Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Science (1990-present); Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Social Science & Humanities (1990-present); Book Citation Index-Science (2009-2014); Conference Proceedings Citation.

terests?". Moreover, 42 respondents who stopped the survey at the very first page were also eliminated from the analysis. The questionnaire contained a few questions of personal background (age, gender, academic field), a few questions on religious practices, beliefs and affiliation, and, finally, a question regarding the respondent's belief in the validity of secularization thesis.

## Coding the publications

The 801 researchers who participated in the survey published a total of 1076 articles addressing secularization. These publications were downloaded, screened, and manually coded to extract relevant information. Articles were included if they either tested the secularization thesis or explicitly discussed it. No exclusion criteria were applied with respect to methodology, to include the widest possible range of research designs, from qualitative case studies to quantitative analyses and theoretical contributions, since the current study does not seek to perform a meta-analysis of numerical estimates of religious change. The coding procedure focused on four dimensions: (a) whether the article supported the secularization thesis (1 = yes; 0 = no); (b) the methodological approach (qualitative, quantitative, or non-empirical); (c) the religious tradition examined; and (d) the geographical context investigated. The operationalization of the dependent variable—support for the secularization thesis—was developed iteratively through engagement with the literature and refined as ambiguous cases emerged. We started by relying on a broad definition of secularization, widely accepted in the field, provided by Dobbelaere (2016). Dobbelaere defines secularization as a multidimensional process of religious decline at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. From this, we developed our coding scheme described in detail below. The articles' support for the secularization thesis was coded dichotomously (1 = supports; 0 = does not support). A binary operationalization was chosen to reflect the central theoretical divide in the literature between defenders and critics of the secularization theory. While we acknowledge that authors' positions may exist along a continuum, the binary distinction ensures comparability across studies. Intercoder reliability was tested on a random subsample of 80 articles, resulting in an 83.8% agreement rate<sup>3</sup>. The following paragraph provides a more detailed description of the criteria for operationalizing this depen-

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<sup>3</sup>Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa statistic, which measures agreement between coders while accounting for chance agreement. Kappa is calculated as the difference between the observed agreement (the proportion of cases where both coders made the same judgment) and the expected agreement (the agreement expected by random chance), divided by the maximum possible agreement beyond chance. The analysis yielded a Kappa of 0.65 (SE = 0.1112,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating substantial agreement between coders.

dent variable. The resulting coded data were merged with survey responses and anonymized prior to analysis.

## Operationalization of Articles' Support of Secularization

### (1) Individual level

Articles were coded as supporting secularization (1) when they provided empirical evidence of declining religiosity or identified mechanisms contributing to this decline—such as educational expansion (Dilmaghani, 2019; Schwadel, 2014), socialization (Cragun et al., 2018), existential insecurity (Hayward & Krause, 2015), or pluralism (Olson et al., 2020). Studies showing the weakening influence of religion on outcomes such as fertility (Cranney, 2015; Matsuo & Matthijs, 2016) or moral attitudes (Knill et al., 2020) were also coded as supporting secularization. Conversely, articles were coded as not supporting secularization (0) when they documented stability or revival of religiosity (Garelli, 2013; Schoeman, 2017; Voicu, 2019), or when they empirically rejected central mechanisms of the theory—such as the relationship between secularization and education (Franck & Johnson, 2016) or scientific advancement (McPhetres et al., 2021). Studies advocating alternative frameworks, such as individualization (Ganiel, 2019; Martínez-Arriño, 2016), holistic spirituality (Altnurme, 2011), implicit religion (Singler, 2020), or the economics model of religion (Brik, 2019), were likewise coded as not confirming secularization.

### (2) Organizational level

At the meso level, studies documenting internal secularization of religious congregations, such as declining vitality or adaptation to worldly concerns, were coded as supporting secularization (Reimer & Hiemstra, 2015; Zängle, 2014). In contrast, evidence of institutional resilience or renewal, such as charismatic movements (Alva, 2016), adaptation strategies (Martínez-Arriño & Griera, 2018), or persistent local traditions (Baldacchino, 2014), led to a “not supporting” code (0).

### (3) Societal level

At the macro level, articles were coded as supporting secularization (1) when they documented the decreasing public significance of religion, such as in state-building and laïcité processes (Peker, 2019) or the declining religious influence on politics (Ignazi & Wellhofer, 2017; Raymond, 2021). Conversely, studies emphasizing the continued public relevance of religion, for instance in politics, welfare, or economics (Andreassen, 2019; Davie, 2015; Van Buren et al., 2020), were coded as not supporting secularization (0).

#### (4) Theoretical Contributions

Non-empirical or conceptual articles were classified according to their stance toward the secularization thesis. Works advancing or reaffirming secularization-based explanations (Aguas, 2020; Cantoni et al., 2018) were coded as supporting secularization (1), whereas those advocating alternative paradigms such as post-secularization (Arat, 2017), multiple modernities (Casanova, 2011), lived religion (Ammerman 2014), or diffused religion (Cipriani, 2011) were coded as not supporting (0).

#### (5) Critical Cases

The iterative nature of the coding process was crucial for managing studies that presented mixed or nuanced findings. Articles were classified as supporting secularization (1) when reporting short-term religious revivals, provided that authors explicitly framed such phenomena as temporary or exceptional. For instance, Audette and Weaver (2016) acknowledged that church growth could occur under specific political circumstances but still described religion as operating in “a shrinking market.” Similarly, Molteni et al. (2021) reported a temporary COVID-19-related increase in religiosity while explicitly reaffirming ongoing secularization. Conversely, some studies showing empirical decline of religion were coded as not supporting secularization (0) when authors explicitly rejected the secularization framework despite their findings. For example, Hekmatpour (2020) observed religious decline but concluded that secularization theory could not explain recent resurgences. Likewise, Franck and Iannaccone (2014) found “much evidence of secularization but no evidence for secularization theory,” leading to a code of 0. Finally, works documenting religious polarization (Wilkins-Lafamme, 2015) or simultaneous processes of secularization and desecularization (Fisher, 2017, 2020; Vorster, 2013) were coded as not supporting (0), as they conceptualized religious change as plural rather than unidirectional.

#### (6) Exclusions

Publications were excluded from the final dataset when: (1) they contained the term “secularization” but were not published in social science journals (14 cases); (2) the author’s position on secularization could not be reliably detected from the text (111 cases); (3) neither the abstract nor the full text was accessible (2 cases). After exclusions, the final analytical sample included 949 articles authored by 703 researchers.

## Dependent variables

The first dependent variable is the respondents' belief in the validity of the secularization thesis. Respondents were asked whether they generally find themselves in agreement with the secularization thesis as a binary question with response options being 1 = "Yes" and 0 = "No"<sup>4</sup>. The second dependent variable is the article's support towards the secularization thesis, measured through articles' manual codification as a binary variable (1 = "Yes" and 0 = "No").

## Independent variable

The main independent variable is an additive religiosity scale ranging from 0 to 8. The scale includes 8 items measuring religious practices, beliefs, and belonging (Billiet, 2002; Voas, 2007, 2009). The scale was constructed using the following items: a self-assessment of religiosity ("How religious are you?") on a scale from 0 to 3; 4 binary items (0 – 1) asking the belief in "Heaven", "Hell", "Life after death" and "God"; a more detailed question on the belief in God ranging from 0 to 4; two questions measuring religious practice, including "How often do you pray?" (from 0 "Never" to 5 "Several times a day") and "Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?" (ranging from 0 to 6). All the variables were normalized between 0 and 1 to thus create a scale ranging from 0 to 8, with higher values indicating greater religious commitment. The scale is very consistent with high factor loadings (ranging from 0.72 and 0.91) and very reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.87 (for details see Table 4.8 and Table 3.6). In our sample, 15.8% of respondents provided partial or no information on their religious beliefs and practices. Sensitive questions like these often have higher non-response rates, but they can become particularly challenging for researchers due to the perceived tension between science and faith in academic settings (Ecklund, 2010). To address missing data on the religiosity scale, we apply multiple imputation using the predictive mean matching (PMM) method<sup>5</sup>. The imputation model includes a linear regression based on available individual-level

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<sup>4</sup>The exact wording of the item is: "Among scholars who address the secularization debate, many argue that the secularization process manifests itself in the overall decline of religious beliefs and practices. Independent of your research outcomes, do you find yourself in agreement with this thesis?"

<sup>5</sup>Predictive Mean Matching (PMM) combines linear regression with nearest-neighbor imputation. It first estimates predicted values using a linear regression model, which are then used to identify the closest matching observed cases (potential donors). One of these observed values is randomly selected and assigned to the missing case. By drawing from actual data points rather than relying solely on model-based predictions, PMM helps preserve the original distribution and enhances robustness compared to fully parametric imputation methods (StataCorp, 2023).

variables: religious affiliation, gender, and age.

## Controls

Researchers' religiosity and their support for the secularization thesis may be influenced by the potential confounders: methodology, research impact, geographical context and religious community investigated. Articles were coded to differentiate between quantitative, qualitative and non-empirical studies. Articles employing a mixed-method approach were categorized as "qualitative" (this concerned roughly 2% of the articles). Information on the different religious traditions analyzed was collected and recoded into eight categories: Christian (encompassing several Christian denominations), Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, Nonreligion, and Spirituality. Numerically smaller religious groups analyzed in the study were grouped under the category "Other". When an article's argument did not revolve around a specific religion, or when the analysis encompassed multiple religious traditions, such as in international survey designs, we labelled it as "Not Specific." Information about the geographical context examined in each article was collected. We distinguished six geographical contexts: North America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (MENA), Asia. If an article did not specify a particular context or involves an international analysis that cannot be easily categorized using the available labels, we labelled it as "Not Specific." Numerically smaller contexts analyzed in the study were grouped under the category "Other". Finally, an indicator of research quality was constructed using research impact, which often reflects greater methodological rigor and peer scrutiny. This indicator combines the article's citation count and the author's H-index. This measure was log-transformed to adjust for the highly left-skewed distribution of the variable. Additional control variables at the respondents' level include religious affiliation (unaffiliated, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, and Muslim), gender, age, and academic field. Looking at the distribution of the articles' conclusions (Table 3.1), we see that the sample divides almost equally among supporters and opponents to the classical thesis of secularization. As shown in Table 1, 45.9% of the articles find support for the secularization theory, while 54.1% of the articles do not. Studies are almost perfectly split between empirical and theoretical papers. Among the empirical publications, approximately 70% consist of quantitative studies.

54.3% of the respondents belong to a religious denomination (Table 3.2), revealing that scholars engaged in the secularization debate are almost equally split in religiously affiliated and unaffiliated. This result is in line with previous research conducted in social sciences (Ecklund et al., 2016; Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007). More

Table 3.1: Descriptive statistics of the variables collected from articles ( $N = 949$ ).

Variable	Labels / Values	Mean	St. Dev.	% (N)
Research conclusion	Do not support secularization			54.06 (513)
	Support secularization			45.94 (436)
Methodology	Not empirical			44.89 (426)
	Qualitative			16.44 (156)
	Quantitative			38.67 (367)
Religious tradition analyzed	Not specific			37.49 (356)
	Christian			21.42 (202)
	Catholic			13.88 (127)
	Protestant			6.56 (62)
	Orthodox			2.08 (21)
	Muslim			7.32 (72)
	Nonreligion			3.61 (35)
	Spirituality			3.83 (38)
	Other			3.83 (36)
Context analyzed	Not specific			29.40 (279)
	North America			10.33 (98)
	Western Europe			37.72 (358)
	Eastern Europe			6.74 (64)
	MENA			4.43 (42)
	Asia			4.32 (41)
	Other			7.06 (67)
Research impact	0–4.46	1.92	0.91	

than half of the affiliated respondents are either Catholic or Protestant, while minor religious groups represented in the sample include Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious denominations such as Hindu and Buddhism. A majority of respondents (57.3%) personally believe that secularization is occurring, while 42.7% do not, indicating that the scholarly community is itself divided on the very existence of secularization. For graphical presentation, religiosity was also categorized into low, medium, and high levels based on  $\pm 1$  SD from the mean.

### Analytical Strategy

To test our research hypothesis, we run logistic regression models on two separate dependent variables. We first model the belief in the validity of the secularization thesis and then the probability of finding evidence of secularization in published articles. Independent variables are added in a step-wise manner. In the first model, only the religiosity scale is added as an independent variable. In Model 2, we include the study's methodology and research impact. Model 3 incorporates the religious tradition analyzed and the geographical area investigated. Finally, the last

Table 3.2: Descriptive statistics of the variables collected from authors ( $N = 703$ ).

Variable	Labels / Values	Mean	St. Dev.	% (N)
Belief in secularization	Yes			57.33 (403)
	No			42.67 (300)
Religiosity	0–8	3.22	2.94	(592)
Religious affiliation	Unaffiliated			45.66 (321)
	Catholic			17.78 (125)
	Protestant			20.34 (143)
	Orthodox			4.27 (30)
	Jewish			3.56 (25)
	Muslim			2.99 (21)
	Other			5.41 (38)
	Academic discipline	Sociology		
Religious Studies				15.08 (106)
Political Science				16.07 (113)
Philosophy				8.11 (57)
History				11.66 (82)
Anthropology				4.98 (35)
Other				12.38 (87)
Gender		Male		
	Female			28.31 (199)
Age	28–86	50.70	12.39	(703)

model of the regression table includes the rest of the control variables, including author's gender, age, religious affiliation, and academic discipline. 18.26% of the 703 authors in the sample have more than one research article included in the list retrieved. Similarly, 14.62% of the articles are authored by more than one scholar in the sample, while the rest consist of single-author papers. To account for the clustered nature of the data, the analysis is conducted using the articles as the unit of analysis and specifying standard errors clustered by author. All models are estimated using multiple imputed data for the religiosity scale, employing the predictive mean matching (PMM) method. We generated 10 imputations to ensure the robustness of the estimates.

## 3.4 Results

### The link between researchers' beliefs and research conclusions on secularization

In this study, two dependent variables are employed: scholars' personal opinion on secularization and the conclusions drawn in their academic publications. We

first explore the relationship between these two measures. Their moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) shows that researchers' opinion and their research conclusions tend to align, although they remain distinct measures. As shown in the contingency table (Table 3.3), 54.9% of scholars who personally support the secularization thesis also report evidence of secularization in their research, while only 31.4% of those who do not support the thesis reach such conclusions in their publications. Conversely, among those rejecting the secularization thesis, 68.6% also produce studies that do not find evidence of religious decline. The association ( $\chi^2 = 50.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) confirms a significant alignment between individual belief and research outcome. We do not make any causal claim here: personal beliefs and research outcomes may influence each other simultaneously. We therefore treat them as two complementary indicators of support for the secularization thesis: opinion reflects what scholars think, whereas conclusion reflects what they find and claim in their publications under academic scrutiny.

Table 3.3: Distribution of research conclusion on secularization by researcher's belief. Percentage distribution ( $N = 949$ ).

Research conclusion	Researcher's opinion	
	Believe in secularization	Do not believe in secularization
Find evidence of secularization	54.95	31.40
Do not find evidence of secularization	45.05	68.60
Total	100	100

$\chi^2 = 50.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Pearson's correlation = 0.23.

## Religiosity, secularity and support for secularization

Our main results are visualized in Figure 3.1, which shows the predicted probabilities of supporting the secularization thesis for scholars with low, medium, and high levels of religiosity. The figure combines results from both outcome variables: researchers' beliefs and publication outputs. Estimates are based on the full models with all controls (Models 4 of Table 3.4). The figure reveals a consistent pattern: as researchers' personal religiosity increases, the probability of endorsing secularization decreases significantly across both dependent variables. This holds true whether we examine what scholars publish or what they personally believe about religious decline.

Table 3.4 presents the estimated coefficients from the logistic analysis of support for secularization, measured both through survey opinion (panel a) and publication output (panel b). Average marginal effects (AMEs) are reported to facilitate inter-

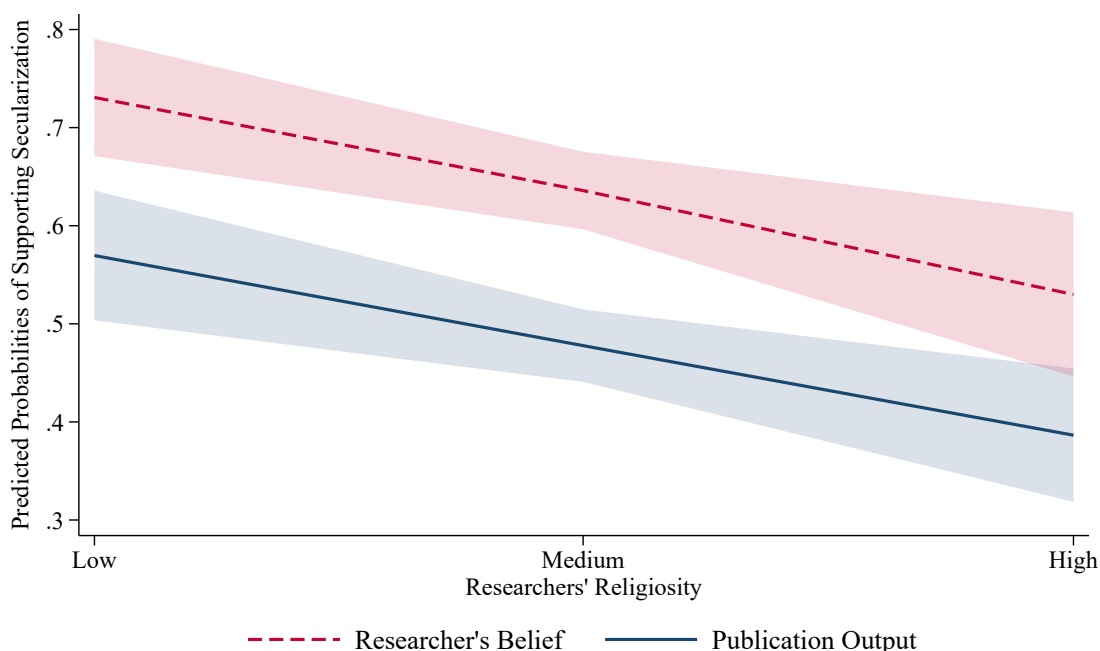


Figure 3.1: Predicted probabilities of believing in the validity of the secularization thesis and of supporting it in published work, by authors' religiosity (95% C.I.). Estimates based on Models 4 in Table 4, including full controls.

pretation. The effect of religiosity remains significant even after the inclusion of all control variables. When the article's methodology is added (Model 2), the association between religiosity and secularization weakens slightly but remains statistically significant. A striking pattern emerges: researchers using quantitative methods are much more likely to report evidence of secularization ( $AME = 0.275, < 0.001$ ) and to state their support ( $AME = 0.169, p < 0.001$ ), whereas qualitative or theoretical approaches show no significant differences. The model incorporates the impact of the study as well, which is not associated with the outcomes. Model 3 includes additional predictors, such as the focus of the study on specific religious traditions and geographic regions. The negative association between religiosity and secularization remains robust ( $AME = -0.016, p < 0.05$  for both outcomes). The final model integrates authors' religious affiliation, academic discipline, and demographic controls (age and gender). The full specification is reported in the Appendix (Table 3.7). Religiosity emerges as a stronger predictor: for publication outcomes, the  $AME$  is  $-0.024$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), while for survey opinions it is  $-0.030$  ( $p < 0.01$ ). Substantively, each one-point increase in religiosity corresponds to a 2.4 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of finding evidence for secularization in publications and a 3.0 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of personally endorsing the secularization thesis. This result supports our hypothesis: secular scholars are more likely

CHAPTER 3. THE FAITH FACTOR. HOW SCHOLARS' RELIGIOSITY BIASES  
RESEARCH FINDINGS ON SECULARIZATION

to support secularization both in their stated opinions and in their published work, compared to their religious counterparts. The effect is substantial: moving from the lowest level of religiosity (0) to the highest (8) corresponds to a 19.2 percentage point decrease in the probability of supporting the secularization thesis in published research and a 24.0 percentage point decrease in the probability of personally believing in secularization. Studies employing quantitative methods remain significantly more likely to report evidence of religious decline (AME = 0.218,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 3.4: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0–1), measured as researcher’s belief (a) and publication output (b). Average Marginal Effects. Observations: 949. Standard errors adjusted for 703 clusters (authors). Models 4 include gender, age, researcher’s religious affiliation, and academic discipline (see Table 3.7 in the Appendix for the full list of coefficients).

Variables	(a) Researcher’s belief in secularization				(b) Research conclusion on secularization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–8)	–0.026*** (0.006)	–0.019** (0.007)	–0.016* (0.006)	–0.030** (0.010)	–0.025*** (0.007)	–0.018** (0.006)	–0.016** (0.006)	–0.024* (0.009)
Methodology (Ref. = Not empirical)								
Qualitative		0.010 (0.051)	–0.038 (0.051)	–0.026 (0.053)		–0.087 (0.047)	–0.127** (0.049)	–0.116* (0.051)
Quantitative		0.169*** (0.043)	0.128** (0.044)	0.135** (0.045)		0.275*** (0.041)	0.224*** (0.042)	0.218*** (0.043)
Research impact (0–4.46)		0.050* (0.021)	0.048* (0.021)	0.039 (0.022)		0.011 (0.021)	0.009 (0.020)	0.009 (0.021)
Religious tradition (Ref. = Not specified)								
Christian			0.058 (0.047)	0.058 (0.046)			–0.017 (0.046)	–0.015 (0.046)
Catholic			0.110 (0.061)	0.098 (0.062)			0.004 (0.054)	0.000 (0.056)
Protestant			0.005 (0.075)	0.008 (0.076)			0.043 (0.067)	0.036 (0.067)
Orthodox			–0.188 (0.133)	–0.203 (0.135)			–0.162 (0.127)	–0.166 (0.126)
Muslim			–0.041 (0.076)	–0.014 (0.077)			–0.240*** (0.058)	–0.220*** (0.063)
Nonreligion			0.200* (0.088)	0.212* (0.086)			0.107 (0.138)	0.139 (0.121)
Spirituality			–0.021 (0.090)	0.011 (0.089)			–0.238** (0.074)	–0.217** (0.078)
Other			–0.031 (0.093)	0.013 (0.104)			–0.170 (0.097)	–0.088 (0.106)
Context (Ref. = Not specified)								
North America			0.092 (0.064)	0.084 (0.065)			0.126* (0.061)	0.117 (0.063)
West EU			0.143** (0.050)	0.128* (0.050)			0.141** (0.045)	0.135** (0.044)
East EU			0.067 (0.083)	0.065 (0.082)			0.045 (0.075)	0.051 (0.077)
MENA			–0.005 (0.108)	0.011 (0.110)			0.372*** (0.080)	0.376*** (0.080)
Asia			–0.061 (0.091)	–0.050 (0.100)			–0.003 (0.081)	–0.009 (0.082)
Other			–0.090 (0.087)	–0.090 (0.085)			–0.072 (0.070)	–0.070 (0.070)
Pseudo $R^2$	0.019	0.056	0.094	0.110	0.015	0.084	0.128	0.148

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Finally, robustness checks using alternative treatments of missing data confirm the consistency of these findings (Tables 3.8 and 3.9 in the Appendix). One could argue that conceptual papers, while not engaging in empirical analysis, are not directly comparable to quantitative or qualitative studies to answer our research question. To account for this, we replicated the analyses excluding theoretical contributions. The results remain substantively unchanged when considering empirical papers only (Table 3.10 in the Appendix). Additionally, we analyzed only quantitative studies, as these rely on more standardized measures of secularization that may be less susceptible to interpretive biases. The main findings hold when restricting the analysis to quantitative research as well (Table 3.11 in the Appendix). Finally, we excluded articles studying Islam and Spirituality, as they might present distinctive religious trajectories that could affect the analysis. The results remain robust to this exclusion (Table 3.12 in the Appendix).

### 3.5 Conclusions

Few terms have the ability to fire up conversations among sociologists of religion like secularization. Despite the amount of research produced on the topic of religious change, no consensus has been reached on the trajectory of religion facing modernity. In this study, we test whether the secularization controversy stems not only from disagreements over empirical evidence on religious decline but also from different religious and secular beliefs of researchers involved in the debate. We find that religiosity has a significant negative impact on both believing in the validity of the secularization thesis and finding evidence for it in published work. This effect size is non-trivial: researchers with the highest level of religiosity are 24.0 percentage points less likely to believe in secularization and 19.2 percentage points less likely to find evidence of secularization in their published work than their secular colleagues. This result cannot be explained by differences in methods used (whether qualitative, quantitative, or non-empirical), study impact, or by differences in the religious traditions or geographical areas under study. Importantly, we cannot determine who is responsible for the bias, whether religious scholars, secular scholars, or both. Nor can we assess to what extent this bias is explicit, intentional, and how much of it is implicit and unwanted. The precise mechanisms through which such biases emerge remain unclear as well. Is it the case that researchers make certain methodological choices to come up with a desired study outcome that is consistent with prior beliefs and orientations? Or is it the case that results that align with authors' ideological views are evaluated less critically than results disregarding their

own personal beliefs? In our view, there is likely a confirmation bias at work: people tend to seek, favor, recall, and value evidence confirming their pre-existing beliefs while ignoring or downgrading disconfirming evidence (Bishop, 2020; Chambers, 2017). Such bias may also influence the trust placed in certain sources, the selection of supportive literature, or the formation of co-authorship networks that reinforce shared perspectives (Sulik et al., 2024). Moving further, we found a clear effect of the methodology adopted by the scholars. Scholars using quantitative approaches find significantly more evidence in support of the secularization thesis in their scholarly work than colleagues using qualitative methods or writing theoretical pieces. There are different ways of interpreting this result. It might be that quantitative researchers' studies are biased by the fact that their surveys insufficiently capture alternative spirituality and therefore overestimate secularization (Houtman & Tromp, 2021). On the other hand, it may be that qualitative researchers have trouble in observing religious change, since they rarely use longitudinal designs. Nevertheless, this result provides empirical evidence for the methodological divide in secularization research, in which support for the classical thesis of religious decline is more commonly found in quantitative studies than in qualitative or non-empirical ones. An important question is whether such biases can be mitigated. Greater emphasis on transparency, preregistration, and replicability could help reduce their impact, fostering a more self-correcting research process (Brezna, 2021).

This study has limitations<sup>6</sup>. First, as this is a cross-sectional study, causal relationships cannot be firmly established. While it is highly likely that religiosity influences our two outcome variables rather than the other way round, reverse causality cannot be completely excluded. It is also possible that additional unmeasured variables act as confounders. Future research on the potential effects of ideological beliefs in scientific production can benefit from the adoption of an experimental design. Second, for the same reason, we are unable to draw conclusions about the probable causal direction between beliefs about secularization and the extent to which scholars report evidence for it in their publications. Third, we have not been able to elucidate the mechanisms leading to this bias. It remains unclear whether the bias lies with the more religious or the more secular researchers, we do not know how much of the bias is implicit (i.e. unwanted) or explicit (i.e. wanted

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<sup>6</sup>It is worth considering whether additional factors may act as confounding variables, simultaneously influencing both researchers' religiosity and their methodological preferences. Traits such as analytical thinking styles (e.g. intuitive versus rational), personality dimensions, philosophical worldviews (e.g. mechanistic/objectivist versus organismic/holistic worldviews) or cognitive traits (e.g. tolerance to ambiguity) could shape both an individual's religious orientation and their preferences towards different research questions, data and measures (Babbage & Ronan, 2000; Sulik et al., 2024)

by advocacy for a normative position), and we can only speculate as to what types of implicit biases are involved (e.g., confirmation bias, blind spot bias, motivated science reception). Fourth, this study only touches on one specific debate in a specific period of time among mainly Western scholars. The generalizability of results to other debates or periods is therefore debatable.

Overall, our findings reveal that the research on secularization is significantly correlated with researchers' own religiosity. This suggests that the long-lasting controversy on religious change cannot be resolved only by bridging diverse data, methods, or standards of quality and rigor. Instead, individual differences not related to the research itself—such as scholars' personal beliefs and values—play a role in producing different schools of thought. Weber (1949) argued that the goal of social scientists is to discover true answers to factual questions while avoiding biased conclusions produced by value commitments and interests. Our findings reveal that the current state of the secularization debate significantly departs from the Weberian ideal<sup>7</sup>. We welcome further investigations into the mechanisms producing these biases. We also welcome suggestions as to how such bias could be prevented.

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<sup>7</sup>While Weber was concerned with protecting research from value judgments, he also recognized that certain values—epistemic ones—would, and indeed must, shape research in the form of value-relevance. We are also aware that many scholars have questioned the very possibility of value-neutral research in the Weberian sense. From this perspective, researchers should not strive for shared or intersubjective objectivity, but instead acknowledge their own positionality and the value-laden nature of knowledge production (Burawoy, 2005).

### 3.6 Appendix

Table 3.5: Results of Factor Analysis (Principal Component Analysis). N=592

	<b>Eigenvalue</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>Proportion</b>	<b>Cumulative</b>
Factor 1	5.700	5.049	0.713	0.713
Factor 2	0.652	0.164	0.082	0.794
Factor 3	0.487	0.091	0.061	0.855
Factor 4	0.396	0.137	0.049	0.904
Factor 5	0.259	0.045	0.032	0.937
Factor 6	0.213	0.050	0.027	0.963
Factor 7	0.163	0.032	0.020	0.984
Factor 8	0.130		0.016	1.000

Table 3.6: Factor Loadings. 1 Factor, 8 items. N=592

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Factor 1</b>	<b>Uniqueness</b>
Religious	0.723	0.477
Church attendance	0.827	0.315
Believe in God	0.914	0.165
Pray	0.875	0.235
Life after death	0.873	0.237
Hell	0.775	0.400
Heaven	0.882	0.223
God	0.867	0.248

Table 3.7: Full Logistic Regression Model Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0-1) measured as researcher's belief (a) and publication output (b) with all controls. Average Marginal Effects. Observations: 949.

Variables	Scale/Categories	(a) Researcher's Belief in Secularization		(b) Research Conclusion on Secularization	
<b>Religiosity</b>	0–8	–0.030**	(0.010)	–0.024*	(0.009)
<b>Methodology</b>	Ref.=Not Empirical				
Qualitative		–0.026	(0.053)	–0.116*	(0.051)
Quantitative		0.135**	(0.045)	0.218***	(0.043)
<b>Research impact</b>	0–4.46	0.039	(0.022)	–0.009	(0.021)
<b>Religious tradition</b>	Ref.=Not Specified				
Christian		0.058	(0.046)	–0.015	(0.046)
Catholic		0.098	(0.062)	0.000	(0.056)
Protestant		0.008	(0.076)	0.036	(0.067)
Orthodox		–0.203	(0.135)	–0.166	(0.126)
Muslim		–0.014	(0.077)	–0.219***	(0.063)
Nonreligion		0.212*	(0.086)	0.139	(0.121)
Spirituality		0.011	(0.089)	–0.217**	(0.078)
Other		0.013	(0.104)	–0.088	(0.106)
<b>Context</b>	Ref.=Not Specified				
North America		0.084	(0.065)	0.117	(0.063)
West EU		0.128*	(0.050)	0.135**	(0.044)
East EU		0.065	(0.082)	0.051	(0.077)
MENA		0.011	(0.110)	0.376***	(0.080)
Asia		–0.050	(0.100)	–0.009	(0.082)
Other		–0.090	(0.085)	–0.070	(0.070)
<b>Religious affiliation</b>	Ref.=Unaffiliated				
Catholic		0.126	(0.064)	0.079	(0.059)
Protestant		0.102	(0.064)	0.059	(0.064)
Orthodox		0.137	(0.107)	0.048	(0.122)
Jewish		0.019	(0.111)	–0.198*	(0.087)
Muslim		0.112	(0.113)	0.055	(0.121)
Other		0.041	(0.096)	–0.016	(0.084)
<b>Gender</b>	Ref.=Male				
Female		–0.047	(0.042)	–0.104*	(0.040)
Age (centered)	–23;+34 (scale 28–86)	–0.001	(0.002)	0.000	(0.001)
<b>Academic Discipline</b>	Ref.=Sociology				
Religious Studies		–0.037	(0.062)	–0.016	(0.055)
Political Science		–0.091	(0.061)	0.029	(0.053)
Philosophy		–0.096	(0.080)	–0.071	(0.073)
History		–0.002	(0.064)	0.078	(0.058)
Anthropology		–0.206*	(0.096)	–0.019	(0.087)
Other		–0.083	(0.064)	–0.045	(0.062)
Pseudo R-squared			0.110		0.148

Standard Errors in parentheses, adjusted for 703 clusters (authors).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 3.8: Robustness Check: Missing Indicator for Religiosity. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0-1) measured as researcher's belief (a) and publication output (b). Average Marginal Effects.

Variables	(a) Researcher's belief in secularization				(b) Research conclusion on secularization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–8)	-0.031*** (0.007)	-0.024** (0.007)	-0.021** (0.007)	-0.035*** (0.010)	-0.028*** (0.007)	-0.021** (0.007)	-0.019** (0.006)	-0.027** (0.009)
Missing Religiosity (0–1)	-0.125* (0.051)	-0.102* (0.052)	-0.084 (0.051)	-0.082 (0.053)	-0.168** (0.049)	-0.144** (0.044)	-0.138** (0.044)	-0.139** (0.043)
Methodology (Ref.=Not Empirical)								
Qualitative		0.004 (0.050)	-0.042 (0.051)	-0.029 (0.052)		-0.093* (0.047)	-0.134** (0.048)	-0.123* (0.051)
Quantitative		0.162*** (0.043)	0.123** (0.044)	0.131** (0.045)		0.268*** (0.041)	0.216*** (0.042)	0.212*** (0.043)
Research impact (0–4.46)		0.046* (0.021)	0.046* (0.021)	0.038 (0.021)		0.007 (0.021)	0.006 (0.021)	0.006 (0.021)
Religious tradition (Ref.=Not Specified)								
Christian			0.056 (0.047)	0.055 (0.046)			-0.020 (0.046)	-0.020 (0.046)
Catholic			0.108 (0.061)	0.094 (0.062)			-0.002 (0.054)	-0.006 (0.055)
Protestant			0.010 (0.075)	0.013 (0.077)			0.043 (0.065)	0.034 (0.066)
Orthodox			-0.170 (0.133)	-0.183 (0.137)			-0.130 (0.128)	-0.129 (0.131)
Muslim			-0.042 (0.075)	-0.013 (0.077)			-0.243*** (0.058)	-0.222*** (0.063)
Nonreligion			0.196* (0.086)	0.210* (0.082)			0.106 (0.138)	0.143 (0.120)
Spirituality			-0.018 (0.091)	0.016 (0.089)			-0.237** (0.075)	-0.215** (0.080)
Other			-0.029 (0.091)	0.018 (0.100)			-0.169 (0.098)	-0.084 (0.108)
Context (Ref.=Not Specified)								
North America			0.091 (0.065)	0.084 (0.065)			0.127* (0.060)	-0.118 (0.063)
West EU			0.138** (0.050)	0.127* (0.049)			0.137** (0.045)	0.134** (0.044)
East EU			0.074 (0.084)	0.079 (0.084)			0.047 (0.076)	0.062 (0.078)
MENA			-0.008 (0.109)	0.009 (0.110)			0.372*** (0.079)	0.376*** (0.079)
Asia			-0.066 (0.089)	-0.052 (0.097)			-0.011 (0.079)	-0.016 (0.080)
Other			-0.078 (0.085)	-0.073 (0.084)			-0.061 (0.071)	-0.054 (0.071)
Pseudo R-squared	0.031	0.065	0.100	0.118	0.029	0.095	0.137	0.157

Standard Error in parentheses adjusted for 703 clusters (authors).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 3.9: Robustness Check: Omitting Authors with Missing Observations on the Religiosity Scale. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0-1) measured as researcher's belief (a) and publication output (b). Average Marginal Effects. Observations: 817. Model 4 includes the following control variables: gender, age, researcher's religious affiliation and academic discipline.

Variables	(a) Researcher's belief in secularization				(b) Research conclusion on secularization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–8)	-0.030*** (0.007)	-0.022** (0.007)	-0.021** (0.007)	-0.033** (0.010)	-0.028*** (0.007)	-0.022** (0.007)	-0.019** (0.007)	-0.031** (0.010)
Methodology (Ref.=Not Empirical)								
Qualitative		0.058 (0.054)	0.007 (0.055)	0.029 (0.057)		-0.103* (0.052)	-0.161** (0.053)	-0.148** (0.056)
Quantitative		0.191*** (0.046)	0.156** (0.046)	0.167*** (0.048)		0.249*** (0.045)	0.186*** (0.045)	0.192*** (0.045)
Research impact (0–4.46)		0.044* (0.022)	0.045* (0.022)	0.021 (0.023)		0.012 (0.023)	0.014 (0.022)	0.013 (0.023)
Religious tradition (Ref.=Not Specified)								
Christian			0.078 (0.050)	0.077 (0.048)			-0.011 (0.050)	-0.014 (0.049)
Catholic			0.134 (0.063)	0.128* (0.063)			0.007 (0.058)	0.005 (0.059)
Protestant			-0.011 (0.080)	-0.020 (0.079)			0.065 (0.071)	0.046 (0.072)
Orthodox			-0.065 (0.153)	-0.008 (0.157)			-0.063 (0.153)	-0.029 (0.179)
Muslim			-0.012 (0.079)	0.040 (0.081)			-0.244*** (0.063)	-0.208** (0.069)
Nonreligion			0.240** (0.083)	0.244** (0.083)			0.090 (0.149)	0.125 (0.136)
Spirituality			-0.006 (0.096)	0.057 (0.091)			-0.264** (0.080)	-0.240** (0.085)
Other			0.013 (0.094)	0.076 (0.104)			-0.213* (0.100)	-0.138 (0.110)
Context (Ref.=Not Specified)								
North America			0.053 (0.069)	0.024 (0.067)			0.149* (0.067)	-0.136 (0.070)
West EU			0.117* (0.053)	0.095 (0.052)			0.175*** (0.048)	0.162** (0.048)
East EU			0.015 (0.088)	0.030 (0.086)			0.068 (0.083)	0.097 (0.086)
MENA			-0.133 (0.123)	-0.126 (0.132)			0.394*** (0.080)	0.405*** (0.076)
Asia			-0.075 (0.092)	-0.075 (0.106)			0.028 (0.084)	0.029 (0.086)
Other			-0.049 (0.093)	-0.072 (0.092)			-0.054 (0.078)	-0.054 (0.077)
Pseudo R-squared	0.028	0.068	0.107	0.138	0.021	0.083	0.135	0.153

Standard Errors in parentheses adjusted for 592 clusters (authors).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 3.10: Excluding non-empirical papers. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0-1) measured as researcher's belief (a) and publication output (b). Average Marginal Effects. Observations: 523. Model 4 includes the following control variables: gender, age, researcher's religious affiliation and academic discipline.

Variables	(a) Researcher's belief in secularization				(b) Research conclusion on secularization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–8)	-0.031*** (0.008)	-0.025** (0.008)	-0.017* (0.008)	-0.030** (0.011)	-0.032*** (0.008)	-0.026** (0.008)	-0.020* (0.008)	-0.031** (0.011)
Methodology (Ref.=Qualitative)								
Quantitative		0.121* (0.052)	0.127* (0.049)	0.129* (0.051)		0.332*** (0.054)	0.314*** (0.054)	0.276*** (0.058)
Research impact (0–4.46)		0.091*** (0.026)	0.075** (0.028)	0.067* (0.028)		0.058* (0.027)	0.024 (0.028)	0.026 (0.028)
Religious tradition (Ref.=Not Specified)								
Christian			0.071 (0.063)	0.079 (0.063)			0.009 (0.061)	0.025 (0.060)
Catholic			0.100 (0.076)	0.076 (0.082)			-0.094 (0.075)	-0.082 (0.077)
Protestant			-0.021 (0.084)	-0.001 (0.082)			0.061 (0.075)	0.083 (0.072)
Orthodox			-0.359* (0.159)	-0.339 (0.183)			-0.254 (0.194)	-0.146 (0.198)
Muslim			-0.062 (0.090)	-0.061 (0.105)			-0.305** (0.088)	-0.312*** (0.087)
Nonreligion			0.169 (0.087)	0.168 (0.091)			0.046 (0.144)	0.113 (0.121)
Spirituality			-0.030 (0.136)	0.062 (0.133)			-0.303* (0.080)	-0.315* (0.133)
Other			-0.130 (0.152)	-0.107 (0.180)			-0.318 (0.214)	-0.286 (0.228)
Context (Ref.=Not Specified)								
North America			0.080 (0.077)	0.050 (0.073)			0.001 (0.071)	-0.008 (0.071)
West EU			0.171* (0.073)	0.140* (0.069)			0.003 (0.063)	-0.003 (0.061)
East EU			0.048 (0.100)	0.024 (0.101)			-0.103 (0.101)	-0.085 (0.101)
MENA			-0.030 (0.155)	-0.009 (0.158)			0.215 (0.136)	0.228 (0.117)
Asia			-0.009 (0.137)	-0.000 (0.156)			-0.266* (0.114)	-0.289** (0.106)
Other			-0.115 (0.120)	-0.103 (0.116)			-0.171 (0.105)	-0.156 (0.109)
Pseudo R-squared	0.038	0.085	0.159	0.187	0.026	0.119	0.175	0.219

Standard Errors in parentheses adjusted for 370 clusters (authors).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 3.11: Excluding non-empirical and qualitative papers. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0-1) measured as researcher's belief (a) and publication output (b). Average Marginal Effects. Observations: 367. Standard Error adjusted for 251 clusters (authors). Model 4 includes the following control variables: gender, age, researcher's religious affiliation and academic discipline.

Variables	(a) Researcher's belief in secularization				(b) Research conclusion on secularization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–8)	-0.027** (0.009)	-0.023* (0.009)	-0.016 (0.009)	-0.029* (0.013)	-0.026** (0.009)	-0.020* (0.009)	-0.013 (0.009)	-0.028* (0.013)
Research impact (0–4.46)		0.086** (0.030)	0.087** (0.032)	0.071* (0.032)		0.110*** (0.027)	0.074* (0.033)	0.096** (0.036)
Religious tradition (Ref.=Not Specified)								
Christian			0.119 (0.072)	0.109 (0.076)			-0.064 (0.075)	-0.051 (0.073)
Catholic			0.166* (0.079)	0.125 (0.088)			-0.106 (0.093)	-0.076 (0.092)
Protestant			0.090 (0.096)	0.110 (0.095)			0.031 (0.083)	0.014 (0.085)
Orthodox			-0.344 (0.205)	-0.406 (0.223)			-0.431 (0.220)	-0.319 (0.220)
Muslim			0.059 (0.108)	0.006 (0.119)			-0.494*** (0.091)	-0.529*** (0.085)
Nonreligion			0.044 (0.123)	0.032 (0.119)			-0.175 (0.167)	-0.082 (0.141)
Spirituality			0.023 (0.148)	0.129 (0.099)			-0.302* (0.149)	-0.359 (0.203)
Context (Ref.=Not Specified)								
North America			0.082 (0.080)	0.043 (0.070)			-0.014 (0.083)	-0.041 (0.077)
West EU			0.134 (0.076)	0.083 (0.066)			0.100 (0.079)	0.099 (0.075)
East EU			0.112 (0.103)	0.042 (0.106)			-0.077 (0.114)	-0.054 (0.113)
MENA			-0.114 (0.235)	0.050 (0.171)			0.243* (0.116)	0.277*** (0.078)
Asia			-0.028 (0.159)	-0.052 (0.160)			-0.148 (0.152)	-0.214 (0.130)
Other			-0.159 (0.142)	-0.137 (0.133)			-0.192 (0.131)	-0.167 (0.138)
Pseudo R-squared	0.031	0.055	0.122	0.185	0.022	0.049	0.138	0.207

Standard Errors in parentheses adjusted for 251 clusters (authors).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 3.12: Excluding articles that study Islam and Spirituality. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Support for the Secularization Thesis (0-1) measured as researcher's belief (a) and publication output (b). Average Marginal Effects. Observations: 839. Model 4 includes the following control variables: gender, age, researcher's religious affiliation and academic discipline.

Variables	(a) Researcher's belief in secularization				(b) Research conclusion on secularization			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–8)	-0.029*** (0.007)	-0.021** (0.007)	-0.018** (0.007)	-0.035** (0.011)	-0.028*** (0.007)	-0.019** (0.006)	-0.017** (0.006)	-0.030** (0.010)
Methodology (Ref.=Not Empirical)								
Qualitative		0.039 (0.053)	-0.016 (0.054)	-0.010 (0.055)		-0.086 (0.051)	-0.125* (0.053)	-0.108 (0.055)
Quantitative		0.167*** (0.047)	0.125** (0.047)	0.129** (0.048)		0.289*** (0.044)	0.255*** (0.045)	0.249*** (0.046)
Research impact (0–4.46)		0.043 (0.023)	0.039 (0.023)	0.031 (0.023)		0.019 (0.022)	0.009 (0.022)	0.007 (0.023)
Religious tradition (Ref.=Not Specified)								
Christian			0.052 (0.047)	0.052 (0.045)			-0.006 (0.047)	-0.003 (0.046)
Catholic			0.105 (0.061)	0.100 (0.061)			0.018 (0.055)	0.019 (0.057)
Protestant			-0.005 (0.075)	-0.001 (0.076)			0.058 (0.068)	0.053 (0.068)
Orthodox			-0.182 (0.134)	-0.205 (0.136)			-0.141 (0.131)	-0.147 (0.128)
Nonreligion			0.191* (0.089)	0.205* (0.085)			0.107 (0.143)	0.142 (0.119)
Other			-0.017 (0.095)	0.016 (0.104)			-0.094 (0.101)	-0.040 (0.112)
Context (Ref.=Not Specified)								
North America			0.106 (0.065)	0.094 (0.066)			0.115 (0.065)	0.098 (0.067)
West EU			0.145** (0.053)	0.126* (0.052)			0.114* (0.048)	0.104* (0.048)
East EU			0.064 (0.086)	0.056 (0.086)			0.011 (0.083)	0.014 (0.086)
MENA			-0.011 (0.167)	0.032 (0.180)			0.200 (0.139)	0.251 (0.148)
Asia			-0.178 (0.100)	-0.157 (0.109)			-0.013 (0.094)	-0.021 (0.099)
Other			-0.105 (0.088)	-0.103 (0.085)			-0.100 (0.075)	-0.092 (0.075)
Pseudo R-squared	0.028	0.060	0.102	0.121	0.021	0.100	0.121	0.147

Standard Errors in parentheses adjusted for 617 clusters (authors).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## Chapter 4

# God meets Peer Review: Is There a Religious Bias in Research Evaluation?<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Scholars of religion tend to be perceived as more subjective and less rigorous than their colleagues in the social sciences, possibly due to suspicions of a religiously inspired agenda (Perry, 2023; Rios & Roth, 2020). This study tests whether ideological bias shapes how sociologists of religion evaluate scientific work — that is, whether researchers tend to rate more favorably studies whose conclusions align with their own religious (or secular) worldview. Using a vignette experiment, participants (N = 809) were asked to evaluate academic abstracts whose conclusions varied along two dimensions: whether religion is declining vs. persisting, and whether religion is of little social significance vs. beneficial. Beyond the evaluative bias, we also examine whether the conclusions of a study systematically influence how readers infer the religious identity of its author. Findings reveal mixed evidence. Scholars' religiosity did not affect evaluations of research on religious change, but more religious respondents rated work portraying religion as socially beneficial more positively than their secular colleagues. The identity-attribution task further indicates that perceptions of the author's religious identity depend on the framing of the abstract.

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<sup>1</sup>A replication package with data and STATA code is available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): [https://osf.io/yjbn5/overview?view\\_only=74858eac150342d5b6b177eaa7d77ab](https://osf.io/yjbn5/overview?view_only=74858eac150342d5b6b177eaa7d77ab) (view-only link). This chapter was presented at the ISSR Conference in Kaunas (2025) and the SISEC Conference in Pavia (2025). I wish to thank all the researchers who provided comments and feedback, especially during the pilot testing of the survey at the University of Milan and the University of Lausanne.

## 4.1 Introduction

The social scientific study of religion tends to be perceived by neighbouring subfields as less rigorous (Rios & Roth, 2020) and as more religious and conservative (Perry, 2023). Such perceptions may stem from the assumption that scholars of religion pursue a particular “agenda”, confirming hypotheses that serve ingroup interests or align with presumed personal beliefs (Rios & Roth, 2020). These findings resonate with broader patterns: the demonstrated tendency to underestimate the scientific ability of religious individuals (Barnes et al., 2020; Rios et al., 2015), the long-standing public narrative of science–religion incompatibility (Hardin et al., 2018) and the antireligious bias within the scientific community more broadly (Ecklund et al., 2016; Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007). Yet whether these perceptions reflect an actual bias in how scholars of religion evaluate scientific work remains an open empirical question. The extent to which researchers’ values and beliefs shape social science — from hypothesis framing to the assessment of others’ findings — is receiving growing attention across a range of ideological domains, particularly political orientations (Borjas & Breznau, 2026; Finseraas et al., 2022; Honeycutt & Jussim, 2020). However, no empirical evidence exists on religiosity as a potential source of bias in research evaluation.

This study addresses this gap using a vignette experiment in which sociologists of religion ( $N = 809$ ) evaluated academic abstracts whose conclusions varied systematically along two dimensions: whether religion is declining or persisting, and whether it is of little social significance or socially beneficial.

By manipulating abstracts’ conclusions and measuring respondents’ own religiosity, we test whether myside bias — the tendency to evaluate evidence more favorably when it aligns with one’s prior beliefs or group commitments — shapes how scholars assess scientific work in their own field. Beyond the evaluative response, we also examine a second, related question: whether the conclusions of a study lead readers to systematically infer the religious identity of its author. If researchers attribute a religious or secular identity to authors based on their findings, this suggests that ideological bias extends beyond the judgment of scientific work to the perception of who produces it.

Drawing on original survey data collected in May 2025 from a global sample of 809 religious studies scholars, we address two research questions: Does personal religiosity influence how scholars evaluate academic research on religion? And do the conclusions of a study shape readers’ inferences about the religious identity of its author?

## 4.2 Theoretical Background and Hypothesis

### Ideological Bias in the Evaluation of Scientific Research

Ideally, scientific findings are meant to be interpreted consistently across different readers. However, research on scientific reasoning suggests that individuals often interpret evidence through the lens of their own values and prior beliefs. People tend to accept evidence that aligns with their expectations and dismiss evidence that contradicts them (Hom & Van Nuland, 2019; Masnick & Zimmerman, 2009). Similar effects appear in judgments of methodological quality: studies whose conclusions challenge a person's beliefs are often rated as less methodologically rigorous than studies whose conclusions align with those same beliefs (Munro et al., 2004). This phenomenon, known as motivated reasoning, reflects the tendency to interpret information in ways that confirm preexisting beliefs and expectations (Kunda, 1990). When applied to science, it is referred to as motivated science reception, wherein individuals perceive scientific evidence through the lens of their own attitudes, beliefs, and identities (Altenmüller & Poppe, 2024) eventually producing confirmation or myside bias.

This confirmation bias is well documented in the general population. Fewer studies, however, have examined the extent to which academics themselves are susceptible to such biases. Abramowitz et al. (1975) documented political bias in the peer-review process among a sample of psychologists. Using an experimental design in which participants evaluated fictitious manuscripts with randomly varied conclusions about student activism and its effects on well-being, they found that publication recommendations were influenced by reviewers' political orientations. Similarly, Finseraas et al. (2022) presented a sample of Norwegian researchers with a study on minority-majority relations in which the substantive conclusions were experimentally manipulated. Abstracts whose conclusions reflected left-liberal assumptions and implications received more favorable evaluations, consistent with the predominantly left-leaning ideological profile of social science researchers. Beyond research evaluation, evidence points to ideological bias in research production as well. Borjas and Breznau (2026) showed that political ideology can shape knowledge production and influence research conclusions in policy-relevant domains. Specifically, researchers holding more pro-immigration attitudes estimated more positive effects of immigration on public support for social programs than colleagues with more restrictive views, despite analyzing the same data. Finally, using a textual analysis of academic publications in economics, Jelveh et al. (2024) found systematic associations between the language used in scholarly articles and researchers'

political partisanship.

To date, no similar work has been done in the context of religion-related research. Examining the influence of religious beliefs and values in academic work addresses a broader question about the compatibility of religious and scientific ways of knowing (Evans & Evans, 2008; Zein et al., 2024). Scientists, overall, are more secular than the general population (Ecklund et al., 2016), but social scientists of religion differ substantially in their religious or non-religious orientations: nearly half report having a religious identification. Personal religiosity is indeed a significant predictor of pursuing a religion-related academic path (Blanton & Krasnick, 2023). Such value heterogeneity can be beneficial for a field, helping to avoid the potential epistemic risks of a single dominant worldview, yet it can also fuel academic disagreements over morally charged topics.

## Selecting the Cases: Secularization and the Religion–Environment Relationship

To test the research questions, we randomize the conclusions of two studies on controversial topics in the sociology of religion for which empirical disagreement exists and that might trigger myside bias among scholars of religion along two dimensions: beliefs about religion’s vitality, and beliefs about religion’s social value.

The question of religious persistence versus decline is addressed in the debate on secularization. Secularization refers to the process of declining social significance of religion driven by modernization (Berger 1967; Dobbelaere 1981; Wilson 1966), leading individuals to abandon their faith and societies to free themselves from religious authority. This transition toward a secular society has long been at the center of academic contestation (Gauthier 2020; Kasselstrand, Zuckerman, and Cragun 2023; Müller 2020; Stolz 2020; Voas 2020). Many scholars have pointed to developments that challenge traditional secularization theory, including the persistent visibility of religion in public life, the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States, the emergence of new religious movements and spiritual practices in the West, and religious revivals in the Global South. Among secularization critics, many explicitly reject grand narratives of religious decline and instead adopt constructivist approaches to the study of implicit or lived religion (Ammerman, 2013), emphasizing the rediscovery of the sacred in everyday practices. Attention has shifted toward new forms of spirituality, which may replace traditional forms of religion that have increasingly been relegated to the private and "invisible" sphere (Davie, 1990, 1994; Luckmann, 1967). Within this debate, the individualization thesis emerged as the main theoretical alternative to secularization (Pollack & Pickel, 2007). Scholars of

individualization argue that religion is not disappearing but rather changing its social forms. They propose that the documented decline of traditional and churched religion does not indicate a decline in the individual search for meaning but instead reflects a transformation of religion into a private and personal matter (Davie, 2000; Hervieu-Léger, 2003; Luckmann, 1967). We therefore derive the following hypotheses:

*Religious scholars will evaluate abstracts confirming the individualization thesis more favorably (H1a), whereas non-religious scholars will evaluate abstracts confirming the secularization thesis more favorably (H1b).*

To capture the dimension of religion's social consequences, we examine the relationship between religiosity and environmental concern. The debate on the relationship between religiosity and pro-environmental attitudes dates back to Lynn White's (1967) provocative thesis tracing the roots of the ecological crisis to Christian theology. The issue has since generated a large but inconclusive literature, with studies reporting positive, null, and negative effects of personal religiosity on environmental attitudes (Felix et al., 2018; Muñoz-García, 2014; Wojcik, 2023). From this literature, we derive the following hypothesis:

*Religious scholars will evaluate abstracts highlighting religion's positive impact on environmental concern more favorably than non-religious scholars (H2).*

The inconclusive state of the literature makes both topics particularly well suited for the present study. Moreover, both involve normative stakes that may motivate ideological reasoning, making these domains particularly susceptible to influence by religious or secular commitments in shaping scholarly judgment.

## **Inferring Authors' Religious Identity from Research**

### **Conclusions**

Beyond evaluating scientific work, individuals may also draw inferences about *who* produces it. When a study's conclusions align with or challenge one's prior beliefs, this may prompt readers to attribute a corresponding ideological identity to its author — assuming, for instance, that a researcher whose findings support secularization must be non-religious, or that one whose work highlights religion's social benefits must be a believer. This form of identity projection extends myside bias beyond the judgment of evidence to the perception of the people behind it, and

raises broader questions about how the religious or secular identity of a scientist is read through the lens of their academic output.

Being religious is generally a stigmatized identity within academia and many religious scientists conceal their religious identity to avoid that stigma. This perception is embedded in a long-standing cultural narrative of incompatibility between religion and science. Scientists have been described as the "carriers of the secularist impulse" (Ecklund, 2010, p. 7), and scientific identity has historically been associated with atheism and secular rationality.

Cognitively, religious thinking has been characterized as more intuitive, while scientific reasoning is seen as systematic, analytic, and counterintuitive (Jedinger & Siegers, 2024; McCauley, 2011; Shenhav et al., 2012). Yet this incompatibility model has been increasingly challenged. Research on "explanatory coexistence" shows that individuals can simultaneously hold natural and supernatural beliefs without experiencing cognitive dissonance (Sharp et al., 2022; Sharp Leicht, 2021). Ecklund's global study of scientists found that many do not experience religion and science as conflicting, but rather as operating in separate domains (Ecklund et al., 2016). Importantly, perceptions of compatibility vary by religiosity: non-religious individuals are more likely to perceive the combination of "religious" and "scientist" as counter-stereotypical and to rate religious individuals as less scientifically competent (Mackey et al., 2023; Sharp et al., 2022). Religious scholars, by contrast, tend to hold more compatible views of the two identities and see them as fully compatible.

We extend this literature by asking whether these compatibility perceptions are shaped not only by one's own religiosity, but also by the content of a researcher's academic output. Specifically, we test whether the conclusions of a study lead readers to infer the religious identity of its author, and whether this inference varies according to the reader's own religious commitments. We expect that scholars will be more likely to attribute a religious identity to authors whose findings are aligned with religious worldviews, and a secular identity to those whose findings are not.

*Religious scholars will more often attribute a religious identity to authors when their findings portray religion as persisting and socially beneficial (H3a), while non-religious scholars will more often attribute a secular identity to authors when their findings portray religion as declining and socially negligible (H3b).*

### 4.3 Data, Methods and Measures

#### Data

The study targets contemporary scholars who have worked on the topic of religion and secularization. To gather this list, a systematic procedure was carried out through a bibliographic search on Scopus database. The query retrieved the list of articles, books, chapters, and reviews written in English about “secularization” and “religion” published between 2001 and 2023. The search was applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords. From this search, the list of authors and co-authors, was retrieved. Scopus automatically provides the email addresses of corresponding authors, while the emails of co-authors were searched manually online. The result of this search, as of January 2025, retrieved a list of 4363 authors and co-authors. An online search was conducted for each author to check the accuracy of the institutional email, and we obtained an updated one in case it changed. At the end of this work, after checking all the initial dataset by eliminating 388 duplicates, finding 78 authors that passed away and discarding 86 authors for which no email was found, the final list of participants who received an invitation for completing the survey consisted of 3811 authors. No restrictions were imposed on academic discipline or geographical origin. The online survey was administered to the 3811 scholars between April 29th and June 8th, 2025 on the platform LimeSurvey. 1095 academics answered the survey, equivalent to a 28.73% response rate. Of these 1095, 286 were excluded because they stopped the survey before completion or provided incomplete information. After data cleaning, the final analytical sample consisted of 809 researchers.

#### The Experimental Design<sup>2</sup>

Respondents were presented with two academic abstracts: one on secularization and the other on the relationship between religion and environmental concerns. The order of appearance of the two abstracts was randomized. The abstracts were not invented from scratch but adapted, with minor modifications, from published articles. The full questionnaire is included in the Appendix 4.7.

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<sup>2</sup>This study was preregistered on OSF ([https://osf.io/ayzd5/overview?view\\_only=f8f470927aba4b9a827a7e1a1287b5cd](https://osf.io/ayzd5/overview?view_only=f8f470927aba4b9a827a7e1a1287b5cd)) (view-only link). Analyses related to the second vignette experiment (religion and environmental concern) were initially thought of as robustness checks. Hypotheses for this experiment were formulated after data collection, and all corresponding analyses are therefore exploratory.

(a) Abstract on Secularization: Individualization versus Secularization

In the secularization abstract, two experimental dimensions were manipulated: conclusion (secularization vs. individualization) and methodology (quantitative vs. qualitative). This 2×2 design resulted in four versions of the abstract, adapted from Kasselstrand (2022) and Pollack and Pickel (2007)<sup>3,4</sup>. The methodological dimension was added as it represents an important line of the secularization controversy. Quantitative studies often rely on established survey data and traditional indicators such as church attendance, typically supporting the classical thesis of religious decline (Houtman et al., 2012). In contrast, qualitative scholars tend to stress the limits of such measures, highlighting individualized or informal forms of religiosity (Gauthier, 2020). Thus, methodology is a key dimension to control for in the vignette experiment. The full wording of the experimental conditions is presented in the Table 4.1 .

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the conditions: (1) secularization and quantitative (N = 211); (2) individualization and quantitative (N = 176); (3) secularization and qualitative (N = 214); (4) individualization and qualitative (N = 208).

(b) Abstract on Environmental Concerns: Positive versus No effect of Religion

In the environmental concerns abstract, the manipulated dimension was the conclusion: either religion was described as having a positive effect on environmental concern, or as having no effect. The two versions were adapted from Hayes and Marangudakis (2001)<sup>5</sup>. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: (1) positive effect (N = 399); (2) no effect (N = 410). The full wording of the experimental conditions is presented in the Table 4.2.

## Measures

### *Evaluation of Academic Abstract*

After reading the abstract, respondents were asked to evaluate it by answering a set of questions. They rated a series of statements on a 1 (very low) – 7 (very high) scale, capturing the following dimensions: validity and relevance of the study,

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<sup>3</sup>Kasselstrand, I. (2022). Secularization or Alternative Faith?: Trends and Conceptions of Spirituality in Northern Europe. *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 15(1-4), 27-55. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-bja10049>

<sup>4</sup>Pollack, D., & Pickel, G. (2007). Religious individualization or secularization? Testing hypotheses of religious change – the case of Eastern and Western Germany. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 58(4), 603-632. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00168.x>

<sup>5</sup>Hayes, B.G. and Marangudakis, M. (2001), Religion and attitudes towards nature in Britain. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 52: 139-155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310020023073>

Table 4.1: Description of the experimental conditions in the abstract presented on secularization

<b>(1) Secularization and quantitative</b>	<b>(2) Individualization and quantitative</b>
<p>The individualization thesis advanced by sociologists of religion such as Grace Davie, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Thomas Luckmann, and others has become increasingly widespread especially in Europe within the sociology of religion. In contrast to the secularization theory it assumes that processes of modernization will not lead to a decline in the social significance of religion, but rather to a change in its social forms. According to the individualization theory, traditional and institutionalized forms of religiosity will be increasingly replaced by more subjective ones detached from church, individually chosen, and syncretistic in character. The article examines the empirical applicability of the individualization thesis on the basis of how religiosity and church affiliation have evolved in Europe over the past 50 years. It comes to the conclusion that the rise of individually determined non-church religiosity cannot compensate for the losses of institutionalized religiosity, since non-church religiosity remains rather marginal and is interwoven with traditional Christian religiosity. Religious individualization is only a component of the predominant secularization process.</p>	<p>The individualization thesis advanced by sociologists of religion such as Grace Davie, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Thomas Luckmann, and others has become increasingly widespread especially in Europe within the sociology of religion. In contrast to the secularization theory it assumes that processes of modernization will not lead to a decline in the social significance of religion, but rather to a change in its social forms. According to the individualization theory, traditional and institutionalized forms of religiosity will be increasingly replaced by more subjective ones detached from church, individually chosen, and syncretistic in character. The article examines the empirical applicability of the individualization thesis on the basis of how religiosity and church affiliation have evolved in Europe over the past 50 years. It comes to the conclusion that the rise of individually determined non-church religiosity can compensate for the decline of institutionalized religion, since non-church religiosity is gaining prominence and increasingly diverges from traditional Christian practices. Religious individualization thus emerges as a transformative component that counterbalances the secularization process.</p>
<b>(3) Secularization and qualitative</b>	<b>(4) Individualization and qualitative</b>
<p>In the debate on European secularization, it has been argued that conventional religion has given way to spirituality, and that religion is thus changing rather than diminishing. Focusing on Europe, this study uses semi-structured interviews to explore meanings and experiences of spirituality and religious beliefs. Findings highlight a movement away from both religiosity and spirituality. Moreover, individuals who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’ hold diverse beliefs about the supernatural and various interpretations of spirituality, some of which are in essence secular. Ultimately, this study suggests that current trends of spirituality are consistent with broader patterns of secularization in Europe.</p>	<p>In the debate on European secularization, it has been argued that conventional religion has given way to spirituality and that religion is thus changing rather than diminishing. Focusing on Europe, this study uses semi-structured interviews to explore meanings and experiences of spirituality and religious beliefs. Findings highlight a rising interest in spirituality. Moreover, individuals who identify as ‘spiritual but not religious’ hold diverse beliefs about the supernatural and various interpretations of spirituality, some of which remain connected to religion. Ultimately, this study suggests that current spiritual experiences align with broader patterns of individualization in Europe.</p>

Table 4.2: Description of the experimental conditions in the abstract presented on environment

(1) Positive effect	(2) No effect
<p>Recent research on the connection between religion and environmental concern and activism has led to divergent conclusions, with some studies identifying a negative effect of religious factors, while others report no significant influence or even a positive impact. Based on survey data from a representative sample of the adult population in Europe, the regression results of this paper suggest that religious respondents are significantly more likely to have higher environmental attitudes than non-religious respondents. Together with educational attainment and levels of scientific knowledge, results demonstrate how religious identification is a consistent factor in determining environmental attitudes in Europe.</p>	<p>Recent research on the connection between religion and environmental concern and activism has led to divergent conclusions, with some studies identifying a negative effect of religious factors, while others report no significant influence or even a positive impact. Based on survey data from a representative sample of the adult population in Europe, the regression results of this paper suggest that there is no significant difference between religious and non-religious respondents concerning environmental attitudes. Moreover, irrespective of religious identification, the two most notable and consistent factors in determining environmental attitudes in Europe are educational attainment and levels of scientific knowledge about the natural environment.</p>

methodological soundness, appropriateness for publication in an academic journal and author’s trustworthiness<sup>6</sup>. A scale was created<sup>7</sup>. The variable has a mean of 4.88 (SD = 1.21) for the secularization abstract, and 4.55 (SD = 1.23) for the environment abstract. The scale proved to be highly reliable with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86 for the secularization abstract and of 0.83 for the environment abstract.

*Perceived (non-)religious identity of the author*

Second, respondents were asked to evaluate the (non-)religious identity of the alleged author of the abstract presented. This question was added to measure respondents’ implicit perception of a (non-)religious bias in the field and to test hypothesis 2 and 3. Respondents positioned the identity of the alleged author on a 11-points scale ranging from convinced atheist (0) to extremely religious (10). The variable has a mean of 4.83 (SD = 1.32) for the secularization abstract, and 4.99 (SD = 1.30) for the environment abstract.

*Religiosity*

The main independent variable is an additive religiosity scale ranging from 0 to 7.

<sup>6</sup>The exact wording of the items is: “I would be interested in reading the full paper”; “I think the author’s findings are convincing”; “I consider the author’s findings worth of getting published in an academic journal in the field”; “I believe this type of research provides important insights”.

<sup>7</sup>While the pre-registration included eight evaluation items, exploratory factor analysis indicated these formed two distinct dimensions rather than a single scale (see in the Appendix Tables 4.8 and 4.9 for factor analysis). I therefore used the four items that loaded coherently on the primary factor (interest, convincingness, publishability, importance) as the main dependent variable.

The scale includes 7 items measuring religious practices, beliefs, and belonging (Biliet, 2002; Voas, 2007, 2009). The scale was constructed using the following items: a self-assessment of religiosity (“How religious are you?”) on a scale from 0 to 3; two questions measuring religious practice, including “How often do you pray?” (from 0 “Never” to 5 “Several times a day”) and “Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?” (ranging from 0 to 6); a more detailed question on the importance of God in one’s life ranging from 0 to 10; 3 items asking the belief in “Heaven”, “Hell”, and “Life after death” choosing between “Yes”, “No” and “Don’t Know”. This latter response category is coded as a midway between “Yes” and “No”. All the variables were normalized between 0 and 1 to create a scale ranging from 0 to 7, with higher values indicating greater religious commitment. The scale is very consistent with high factor loadings (ranging from 0.82 and 0.92) and very reliable with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.88 (for details see Table 4.10 in the Appendix).

#### *Control Variables*

As part of the questionnaire, several questions were included on participants’ socio-demographic variables, academic experience and tolerance to ambiguity. To control for potential confounding factors influencing the main relationship of interest, a battery assessing cognitive traits was administered. Specifically, tolerance for ambiguity is measured through a set of items, as this trait has been shown to predict attitudes toward controversial themes in a sample of psychologists and reflects methodicalness (Sulik et al., 2024). Furthermore, it is associated with religiosity: more religious individuals tend to exhibit lower tolerance for uncertainty (Watson & Morris, 2006), and experimental evidence confirms that religious priming promotes a rigid cognitive style and greater intolerance for ambiguity (Sagioglou & Forstmann, 2013). Finally, the survey collects information on respondents’ disciplinary background, academic experience, methodological preference, religious denomination, and sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., gender and age).

### **Analytical strategy**

To test the study’s hypotheses, linear regression models were estimated for both the secularization and the environment abstracts separately. In the first part, the dependent variable is the evaluation of the academic abstract. Abstract conclusions are included as a moderating variable to test whether researchers’ religiosity influences abstract ratings depending on the study’s conclusions. In the second part, the dependent variable is the perceived (non-)religious identity of the alleged au-

Table 4.3: Descriptive statistics of the analytical sample. N = 809

Variable	Values	Labels	Mean	St. Dev.	%	N
Religiosity	0–7		2.93	2.58		
Academic Experience	0–65		22.31	12.44		
Intolerance to Ambiguity	0–3.71		1.41	0.66		
Age	23–98		53.75	12.65		
Gender		Male			70.83	573
		Female			29.17	236
Religious affiliation		Unaffiliated			43.76	354
		Catholic			20.52	166
		Protestant			22.00	178
		Orthodox			3.96	32
		Jewish			2.84	23
		Muslim			4.08	33
		Other			2.84	23
Academic Field		Sociology			31.89	258
		Religious Studies			14.34	116
		History			11.74	95
		Political Science			9.89	80
		Philosophy			7.66	62
		Anthropology			6.85	55
		Other			17.68	143
Methodological Preference		Non-empirical			14.46	117
		Qualitative			40.30	326
		Mixed-methods			27.69	224
		Quantitative			17.55	142

thor of the abstract, measured on an 11-point scale. These regression models test whether participants’ religiosity affects perceptions of the author’s likelihood of being religious or atheist, and whether this effect varies depending on the abstract’s conclusions. Models were estimated in a stepwise manner, progressively including variables of interest and control variables.

## 4.4 Results

### Is there a Religious Bias in Research Evaluation?

Figure 4.1 displays the predicted values of abstract evaluations (on a 1–7 scale), by level of religiosity and experimental condition to which they were randomly assigned, based on fully specified regression models including all controls.

Panel (a) refers to the secularization abstract. The plot shows a slightly higher assessment of the abstract among religious researchers, although this effect is not statistically significant. Respondents’ religiosity is not significantly associated with the evaluation of the abstract, nor is the abstract’s conclusion (secularization vs.

individualization). The interaction between religiosity and the experimental condition is also not significant. In other words, religious and non-religious scholars do not differ in their assessment of academic abstracts, providing no support for Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Across all models in Table 4.4, religiosity is not significantly associated with evaluations of the abstract and the only significant predictor is the study’s methodology: abstracts using qualitative methods are rated significantly lower than those employing quantitative methods, net of respondents’ religiosity and all other controls.

Panel (b) shows results for the environment abstract. Here, the interaction between religiosity and abstract conclusion is statistically significant. While evaluations of the “no effect” abstract remain stable across levels of religiosity, ratings of the “positive effect” abstract increase sharply among more religious respondents. This finding supports Hypothesis 2, according to which religious scholars rate more positively research that highlights religion’s societal benefits.

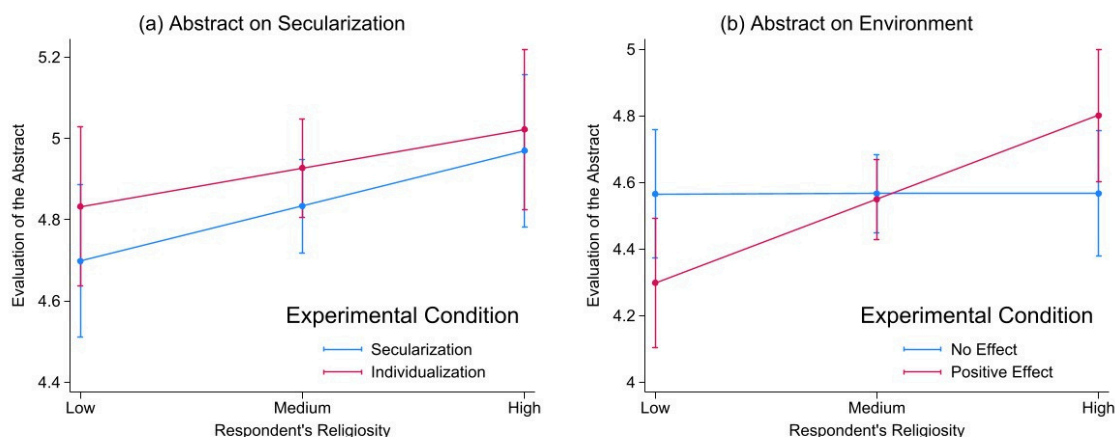


Figure 4.1: Predicted values of abstract evaluation (1-7) by respondent’s religiosity and experimental condition. Estimated based on the full model with controls. N= 803.

Taken together, these results reveal an asymmetry in how religiosity shapes scholarly evaluations: religious and non-religious respondents do not differ in their evaluations of the secularization abstract, but they diverge markedly when the content frames religiosity as having a beneficial impact on environmental attitudes.

Tables 4.4 and 4.5 present the results of the linear regression models predicting

respondents' evaluations of the academic abstract (on a 1–7 scale), for both abstracts presented, based on respondent's level of religiosity and the experimental condition to which they were randomly assigned. The models progressively introduce additional variables: Model 1 includes only respondents' religiosity; Model 2 adds the experimental conditions (abstract's conclusion and method); Model 3 introduces the interaction between religiosity and abstract conclusion; and Model 4 further controls for academic experience and field, methodological preference, religious affiliation, and tolerance for ambiguity. See Tables 4.11 and 4.12 in the Appendix for the full list of coefficients.

Table 4.4: Regression models with evaluation of the abstract on **Secularization** (1–7 scale) as dependent variable. Model 4 includes the following controls: age, gender, methodological preference, tolerance to ambiguity, religious denomination, and academic field.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–7)	0.032* (0.017)	0.030 (0.017)	0.039 (0.023)	0.053 (0.029)
Experimental Condition – Abstract's Conclusion (ref.=Secularization)				
Individualization		0.103 (0.085)	0.158 (0.129)	0.140 (0.129)
Experimental Condition – Abstract's Method (ref.=Quantitative)				
Qualitative		-0.212* (0.085)	-0.208* (0.086)	-0.182* (0.086)
Experimental Condition – Abstract's Conclusion $\times$ Religiosity				
Individualization $\times$ Religiosity			-0.019 (0.033)	-0.016 (0.033)
Intercept	4.783 (0.064)	4.853 (0.090)	4.825 (0.103)	4.979 (0.243)
$R^2$	0.005	0.014	0.014	0.046

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

One potential concern is that respondents were asked to evaluate aspects such as validity, methodological soundness, and publishability based solely on a short abstract, which may be cognitively demanding and unrealistic. To address this, a robustness check was conducted using only the item “I would be interested in reading the full paper” as the dependent variable. This measure might capture a milder form of evaluative bias. The results of this alternative specification are reported in Tables 4.15 and 4.16 in the Appendix. Overall, the findings remain substantively similar. However, the interaction between respondents' religiosity and the study conclusion in the Environment abstract is no longer statistically significant, suggesting that this effect may be sensitive to the choice of outcome measure.

Table 4.5: Regression models with evaluation of the abstract on **Environment** (1–7 scale) as dependent variable. Model 4 includes the following controls: age, gender, methodological preference, tolerance to ambiguity, religious denomination, and academic field.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–7)	0.047** (0.017)	0.047** (0.017)	–0.004 (0.024)	0.000 (0.029)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion (ref.=No Effect)				
Positive Effect		0.000 (0.086)	–0.301* (0.130)	–0.301* (0.131)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion × Religiosity				
Positive Effect × Religiosity			0.103** (0.033)	0.097** (0.033)
Intercept	4.415 (0.065)	4.414 (0.079)	4.571 (0.093)	4.789 (0.245)
$R^2$	0.010	0.010	0.022	0.061

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## Do Researchers Perceive an Ideological Bias in Research Production?

Figure 4.2 presents the predicted values of the perceived religious identity of the author (0 = atheist, 10 = extremely religious), by respondents’ religiosity and the experimental condition. Results are shown separately for the two experimental vignettes. For the secularization abstract (panel a), respondents’ religiosity is positively associated with perceptions of the author’s religiosity: more religious respondents tend to ascribe greater religiosity to the author. This suggests that, in general, religious scholars hold stronger compatibility beliefs between science and religion, making the attribution of religiosity to social scientists more intuitive. However, the difference between the secularization and individualization conditions is small and not statistically significant across levels of religiosity. Contrary to Hypothesis 3a, religious respondents do not systematically attribute lower religiosity to authors of abstracts supporting the secularization thesis.

For the environmental abstract (panel b), the experimental condition exerts a clear and consistent main effect. Respondents exposed to the abstract reporting a positive effect of religiosity on environmental concern perceive the author as significantly more religious than those who read an abstract reporting no effect. This difference remains stable across all levels of respondent religiosity, as the interaction term is not significant. These findings do not support Hypothesis 3b, as religious and non-religious respondents do not differ in their attribution of (non-)religious identity based on the content of the abstract. See Tables 4.13 and 4.14 in the Ap-

pendix for the full list of coefficients.

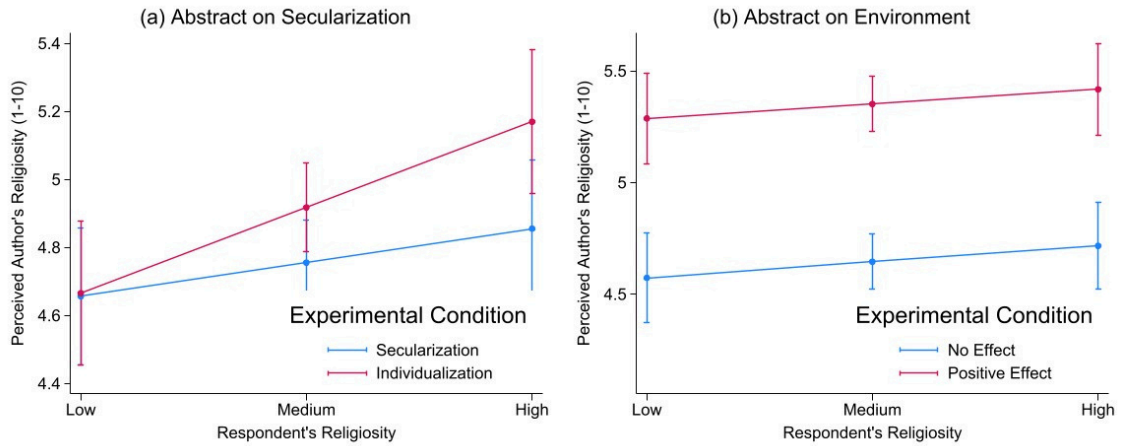


Figure 4.2: Predicted values of perceived religious identity of the author (0-10) by respondent's religiosity and experimental condition. Estimated based on the full model with controls. N= 803.

Overall, the evidence does not support Hypotheses 3a or 3b: while both respondents' religiosity and the nature of the abstract's conclusion independently influence perceptions of author religiosity, there is no interactive effect suggesting that religious and non-religious scholars draw different inferences from the same conclusions. The consistent main effect of the "positive effect" condition, however, points to a content-based bias in identity attributions.

CHAPTER 4. GOD MEETS PEER REVIEW: IS THERE A RELIGIOUS BIAS IN  
RESEARCH EVALUATION?

Table 4.6: Regression models with Author’s Perceived Religiosity (0–10 scale) as dependent variable. Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, methodological preference, tolerance to ambiguity, religious denomination, and academic field.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–7)	0.087*** (0.018)	0.083*** (0.018)	0.055* (0.025)	0.039 (0.031)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion (ref.=Secularization)				
Individualization		0.145 (0.092)	–0.030 (0.138)	–0.011 (0.139)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Method (ref.=Quantitative)				
Qualitative		–0.270** (0.092)	–0.282** (0.092)	–0.325*** (0.092)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion × Religiosity				
Individualization × Religiosity			0.060 (0.036)	0.059 (0.036)
Intercept	4.576 (0.069)	4.658 (0.097)	4.750 (0.111)	5.078 (0.261)
$R^2$	0.029	0.042	0.045	0.074

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4.7: Regression models with Author’s Perceived Religiosity (0–10 scale) as dependent variable. Model 4 includes controls for age, gender, methodological preference, tolerance to ambiguity, religious denomination, and academic field.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (with controls)
Religiosity (0–7)	0.038* (0.018)	0.043* (0.017)	0.047 (0.024)	0.028 (0.030)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion (ref.=No Effect)				
Positive Effect		0.698*** (0.088)	0.718*** (0.133)	0.714*** (0.136)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion × Religiosity				
Positive Effect × Religiosity			–0.007 (0.034)	–0.003 (0.035)
Intercept	4.881 (0.069)	4.523 (0.080)	4.512 (0.095)	4.515 (0.255)
$R^2$	0.006	0.078	0.078	0.093

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 4.5 Conclusions

Scientific claims should be evaluated following impersonal principles, independent of the personal background or beliefs of those who assess them. Yet empirical investigations into the role of ideological bias in research evaluation have attracted growing attention in the social sciences, to explore, for example, the role of researchers' political orientations in research assessments. This study contributes to this literature by examining whether religious or secular bias shapes the judgment of academic research, using a vignette experiment in which respondents evaluated abstracts with systematically varied conclusions about secularization and the religion–environment relationship.

The findings provide mixed evidence regarding the presence of religious bias in scholarly evaluation. For the abstract addressing secularization, respondents' religiosity was not significantly associated with evaluations of the research. This suggests that personal religious orientations do not systematically bias judgments when the topic is familiar. Importantly, the sample consisted of scholars with publication experience on secularization, which implies a relatively high level of domain-specific expertise a factor that may constrain the influence of personal beliefs on evaluative judgments.

By contrast, when the topic shifted to the relationship between religion and environmental concern, respondents' religiosity did shape evaluations. Abstracts reporting a positive effect of religiosity on environmental attitudes were evaluated more favorably by more religious respondents and less favorably by less religious ones. This pattern suggests that ideological predispositions are more likely to be activated when research findings carry normative implications, particularly when religion is framed as socially beneficial.

The article further explores whether such a bias extends to the perceived religious identity of the author through an identity-attribution task. Distinct patterns emerged across the two experimental contexts. In the secularization abstract, more religious respondents tended to attribute greater religiosity to the author regardless of the abstract's substantive conclusion, possibly reflecting broader beliefs about the compatibility of science and religion among religious scholars. In the environmental abstract, perceived author religiosity was driven primarily by the content of the findings: abstracts reporting a positive effect of religion on environmental concern led respondents to perceive the author as more religious, independent of their own religiosity. Together, these two outcomes suggest that myside bias in scholarly evaluation may extend beyond the judgment of scientific work to the perception of who produces it — with scholars tending to read the ideological identity of an author

through the lens of their conclusions.

Differences in evaluations were also observed across the two secularization abstracts. The abstract employing qualitative methods received lower ratings than the one employing quantitative methods. While this result might be consistent with a general preference in the social sciences for quantitative research (Schwemmer & Wieczorek, 2020), the two abstracts also differed in length and level of detail: features that may independently affect perceived quality. This difference therefore cannot be unambiguously attributed to methodological preferences, and future studies should systematically explore how methodology affects evaluations while holding other features constant.

Taken together, the results indicate that religious or secular bias in research evaluation is not uniform but appears more likely to emerge when research presents religion as socially beneficial, a framing that may invite stronger identity-based interpretations of both the research and its author. A more cautious interpretation, however, emphasizes the limitations of the experimental design. Evaluating brief abstracts provides limited information, which may encourage respondents to rely on heuristics or prior beliefs when forming judgments. Indeed, several respondents noted the artificiality of assessing research quality and author identity based solely on an abstract. While vignette designs offer important advantages in terms of experimental control and respondent burden, they may increase measurement noise by leaving room for heterogeneous assumptions about missing contextual details.

Additional limitations concern the scope of the sample and the experimental conditions. The exclusive focus on scholars of religion limits the generalization of the findings to other academic fields. Moreover, the design did not include a condition in which religion was portrayed as having a negative societal effect, restricting the ability to assess asymmetries in responses to positive versus negative findings.

Overall, the study suggests that (non-)religious bias in scholarly evaluation is not uniform but varies across research domains and frames. Domain familiarity may reduce reliance on identity-based heuristics, whereas less familiar or more normatively charged topics may leave greater room for personal beliefs to shape evaluative judgments. The framing of the research also affects how reviewers perceive the author, with scholars tending to attribute a religious identity to authors whose work portrays religion in a positive light. Given that religious studies scholars are already perceived as less rigorous and more biased than their colleagues (Perry, 2023; Rios & Roth, 2020), this pattern may carry consequences beyond individual evaluations — potentially shaping the academic reputation of scholars whose work portrays religion in a favorable light. This work demonstrates that motivated science reception and myside bias in research evaluation are pervasive phenomena, not confined to

CHAPTER 4. GOD MEETS PEER REVIEW: IS THERE A RELIGIOUS BIAS IN  
RESEARCH EVALUATION?

laypeople — expert scholars are not immune to it. Under what conditions this bias is activated, and how it might be prevented, remain important questions for future research.

## 4.6 Appendix

### Factor Analysis for the Evaluation Index

Table 4.8: Factor Analysis of the Evaluation Index for the Secularization Abstract with oblique rotation (promax). Factor Loadings. 2 Factors, 8 items.  $N = 809$ .

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Interest in reading	0.851	-0.051	0.313
Convincing findings	0.766	0.065	0.362
Publishability	0.864	-0.040	0.284
Important insights	0.864	-0.011	0.263
Relevance (reversed)	0.350	0.421	0.564
Method skeptical (reversed)	-0.050	0.804	0.388
Bias perception (reversed)	-0.031	0.762	0.441
Method unsuitable (reversed)	-0.012	0.837	0.309
Eigenvalue	3.798	1.279	
% variance explained	47.48%	15.99%	
Factor correlation	.464		

Table 4.9: Factor Analysis of the Evaluation Index for the Environment Abstract with oblique rotation (promax). Factor Loadings. 2 Factors, 8 items.  $N = 809$ .

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Interest in reading	0.838	-0.123	0.377
Convincing findings	0.707	0.124	0.405
Publishability	0.882	-0.038	0.252
Important insights	0.836	0.037	0.272
Relevance (reversed)	0.384	0.436	0.511
Method skeptical (reversed)	-0.081	0.795	0.420
Bias perception (reversed)	-0.095	0.811	0.403
Method unsuitable (reversed)	0.107	0.763	0.332
Eigenvalue	3.773	1.256	
% variance explained	47.17%	15.71%	
Factor correlation	.454		

An exploratory principal component analysis with oblique (promax) rotation was conducted on the eight evaluation items for each abstract. Two factors with eigenvalues  $> 1$  were extracted, together explaining approximately 63% of total variance. The factor structure was highly consistent across both abstracts. Factor 1 (eigenvalue = 3.80 for secularization, 3.77 for environment) explained approximately 47% of variance and comprised four items measuring positive research evaluation: interest in reading the full paper (loadings: .851, .838), convincing findings (.766, .707), publishability (.864, .882), and important insights (.864, .836). Factor 2 (eigenvalue = 1.28 for secularization, 1.26 for environment) explained approximately 16% of variance and comprised three reverse-coded items reflecting methodological

skepticism: method skeptical (.804, .795), bias perception (.762, .811), and method unsuitable (.837, .763). The two factors were moderately correlated ( $r = .46$  for both abstracts). One item—relevance (reversed)—showed cross-loadings on both factors (.350/.421 for secularization; .384/.436 for environment) and was excluded from the index given its high uniqueness values. Given this clear two-factor structure, we constructed our primary dependent variable as the additive index of the four Factor 1 items. The index demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .856$  for the secularization abstract and  $\alpha = .835$  for the environment abstract.

## Factor Analysis for the Religiosity Scale

Table 4.10: Factor Analysis of the Religiosity Scale. Factor Loadings. Unrotated solution. 1 Factor, 7 items.  $N = 809$ .

Variable	Factor 1	Uniqueness
Church Attendance	0.857	0.266
Religious	0.895	0.198
Belief in Heaven	0.920	0.153
Belief in Hell	0.823	0.323
Belief in Life after Death	0.883	0.220
Frequency Pray	0.905	0.181
Importance of God	0.917	0.159
Eigenvalue	5.501	
% variance explained	78.58%	

The principal-component factor analysis retains one factor. All variables display very high factor loadings (ranging from 0.82 to 0.92), suggesting that religious practice (church attendance, pray), religious self-identification, and religious beliefs (in God, heaven, hell, afterlife) all tap into a single latent construct. The relatively low uniqueness values indicate that most of the variance in each item is accounted for by the common factor. The high Cronbach’s Alpha (0.881) confirms the reliability and internal consistency of the scale.

Table 4.11: Full Regression results predicting the evaluation of the abstract on Secularization (1–7 scale) as dependent variable. Unstandardized results.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Religiosity (0–10)	0.053	(0.029)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion (ref.=Secularization)		
Individualization	0.140	(0.129)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Method (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	–0.182*	(0.086)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion × Religiosity		
Individualization × Religiosity	–0.016	(0.033)
Methodological Preference (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	0.057	(0.147)
Mixed-method	0.254	(0.154)
Quantitative	0.013	(0.171)
Academic Experience (0–65 years)	–0.002	(0.006)
Discipline (ref.=Sociology)		
Religious Studies	0.158	(0.142)
History	–0.059	(0.152)
Political Studies	–0.085	(0.156)
Philosophy	–0.114	(0.196)
Anthropology	–0.224	(0.184)
Other	–0.339**	(0.127)
Tolerance to Ambiguity (0–4)	–0.084	(0.067)
Age (centered)	–0.001	(0.006)
Gender (ref.=Male)		
Female	0.025	(0.098)
Religious Denomination (ref.=Not Affiliated)		
Catholic	–0.182	(0.150)
Protestant	–0.142	(0.146)
Orthodox	0.061	(0.240)
Jewish	–0.219	(0.265)
Muslim	0.180	(0.249)
Other	–0.428	(0.274)
Intercept	4.979	(0.243)
$R^2$	0.046	

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4.12: Full Regression results predicting the evaluation of the abstract on Environment (1–7 scale) as dependent variable. Unstandardized results.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Religiosity (0–7)	0.000	(0.029)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion (ref.=No Effect)		
Positive Effect	–0.301*	(0.131)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion × Religiosity		
Positive Effect × Religiosity	0.097**	(0.033)
Methodological Preference (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	0.011	(0.148)
Mixed-method	0.266	(0.154)
Quantitative	0.332	(0.172)
Academic Experience (0–65 years)	–0.100	(0.068)
Discipline (ref.=Sociology)		
Religious Studies	0.033	(0.143)
History	–0.330*	(0.152)
Political Studies	–0.097	(0.156)
Philosophy	–0.207	(0.197)
Anthropology	–0.322	(0.184)
Other	–0.351**	(0.128)
Tolerance to Ambiguity (0–4)	–0.100	(0.068)
Age (centered)	0.004	(0.006)
Gender (ref.=Male)		
Female	–0.072	(0.098)
Religious Denomination (ref.=Not Affiliated)		
Catholic	–0.018	(0.150)
Protestant	–0.037	(0.146)
Orthodox	0.089	(0.241)
Jewish	–0.101	(0.266)
Muslim	0.340	(0.251)
Other	–0.335	(0.275)
Intercept	4.789	(0.245)
$R^2$	0.061	

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4.13: Full Regression results predicting the perceived religious identity of the author as the dependent variable (0–10), for the Secularization Abstract. Unstandardized results.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Religiosity (Respondent) (0–10)	0.039	(0.031)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion (ref.=Decline)		
Individualization	–0.011	(0.139)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion $\times$ Religiosity		
Individualization $\times$ Religiosity	0.059	(0.036)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Method (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	–0.325***	(0.092)
Methodological Preference (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	–0.022	(0.158)
Mixed-method	0.065	(0.165)
Quantitative	–0.020	(0.184)
Tolerance to Ambiguity (0–4)	–0.095	(0.072)
Age (centered)	0.010	(0.006)
Gender (ref.=Male)		
Female	0.015	(0.105)
Discipline (ref.=Sociology)		
Religious Studies	–0.360*	(0.153)
History	–0.091	(0.163)
Political Studies	–0.122	(0.168)
Philosophy	–0.091	(0.211)
Anthropology	–0.350	(0.198)
Other	0.026	(0.137)
Academic Experience (0–65 years)	–0.005	(0.006)
Religious Denomination (ref.=Not Affiliated)		
Catholic	0.246	(0.161)
Protestant	0.164	(0.157)
Orthodox	–0.407	(0.258)
Jewish	0.013	(0.285)
Muslim	–0.135	(0.268)
Other	0.106	(0.295)
Intercept	5.078***	(0.261)
$R^2$	0.074	

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4.14: Full Regression results predicting the perceived religious identity of the author as the dependent variable (0–10), for the Environment Abstract. Unstandardized results.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Religiosity (Respondent) (0–10)	0.028	(0.031)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion (ref.=No Effect)		
Positive Effect	0.714***	(0.136)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Conclusion × Religiosity		
Positive Effect × Religiosity	–0.003	(0.035)
Methodological Preference (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	–0.165	(0.154)
Mixed-method	–0.134	(0.160)
Quantitative	–0.206	(0.178)
Tolerance to Ambiguity (0–4)	0.068	(0.070)
Age (centered)	0.004	(0.006)
Gender (ref.=Male)		
Female	0.023	(0.102)
Discipline (ref.=Sociology)		
Religious Studies	–0.073	(0.148)
History	0.021	(0.158)
Political Studies	0.047	(0.162)
Philosophy	0.152	(0.205)
Anthropology	0.011	(0.191)
Other	0.079	(0.133)
Academic Experience (0–65 years)	0.001	(0.006)
Religious Denomination (ref.=Not Affiliated)		
Catholic	0.129	(0.156)
Protestant	–0.012	(0.152)
Orthodox	–0.138	(0.250)
Jewish	0.089	(0.276)
Muslim	0.298	(0.260)
Other	0.524	(0.286)
Intercept	4.515***	(0.254)
$R^2$	0.093	

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4.15: Full Regression results predicting the interest in reading the full paper on Secularization (1–7 scale) as dependent variable. Unstandardized results.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Religiosity (0–10)	0.074	(0.038)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion (ref.=Secularization)		
Individualization	0.130	(0.167)
Experimental Condition – Abstract’s Method (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	–0.307**	(0.111)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion × Religiosity		
Individualization × Religiosity	–0.007	(0.043)
Methodological Preference (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	0.025	(0.190)
Mixed-method	0.391*	(0.198)
Quantitative	0.092	(0.221)
Academic Experience (0–65 years)	–0.010	(0.008)
Discipline (ref.=Sociology)		
Religious Studies	0.054	(0.184)
History	–0.119	(0.196)
Political Studies	–0.177	(0.201)
Philosophy	–0.122	(0.254)
Anthropology	–0.311	(0.237)
Other	–0.653***	(0.164)
Tolerance to Ambiguity (0–4)	–0.109	(0.087)
Age (centered)	0.006	(0.007)
Gender (ref.=Male)		
Female	0.136	(0.126)
Religious Denomination (ref.=Not Affiliated)		
Catholic	–0.275	(0.194)
Protestant	–0.278	(0.188)
Orthodox	0.064	(0.310)
Jewish	–0.192	(0.342)
Muslim	–0.046	(0.322)
Other	0.031	(0.354)
Intercept	5.502	(0.314)
$R^2$	0.060	

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Table 4.16: Full Regression results predicting the interest in reading the full paper on Environment (1–7 scale) as dependent variable. Unstandardized results.  $N = 809$ .

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Religiosity (0–10)	0.045	(0.040)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion (ref.=Secularization)		
Positive effect	0.113	(0.179)
Experimental Condition – Abstract Conclusion × Religiosity		
Positive effect × Religiosity	0.069	(0.046)
Methodological Preference (ref.=Quantitative)		
Qualitative	0.199	(0.202)
Mixed-method	0.684**	(0.211)
Quantitative	0.783**	(0.234)
Tolerance to Ambiguity (0–4)	–0.131	(0.092)
Age (centered)	0.018*	(0.008)
Gender (ref.=Male)		
Female	–0.068	(0.134)
Academic Experience (0–65 years)	–0.013	(0.008)
Discipline (ref.=Sociology)		
Religious Studies	0.156	(0.195)
History	–0.417*	(0.208)
Political Studies	0.147	(0.214)
Philosophy	0.055	(0.269)
Anthropology	–0.444	(0.252)
Other	–0.339	(0.175)
Religious Denomination (ref.=Not Affiliated)		
Catholic	–0.228	(0.205)
Protestant	–0.159	(0.200)
Orthodox	–0.010	(0.329)
Jewish	–0.215	(0.363)
Muslim	0.341	(0.342)
Other	–0.218	(0.376)
Intercept	4.440***	(0.335)
$R^2$	0.082	

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 4.7 Questionnaire

### Welcome Message

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a survey conducted as part of a PhD project at the University of Trento, Italy.

The purpose of this study is to explore how researchers at universities and research institutes evaluate academic abstracts related to religion.

The questionnaire includes a few background questions and two short evaluations of academic abstracts on topics in the sociology of religion.

Completing the survey will take approximately 10 minutes. If needed, you may pause the survey and return to complete your responses at any time until the study concludes.

Your data will be treated confidentially and in accordance with GDPR regulations. It will not be possible to identify you or your individual answers in the final analysis. You can find more details about data protection and how your information will be handled in the privacy policy below.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Sincerely, Valeria Rainero – [valeria.rainero@unitn.it](mailto:valeria.rainero@unitn.it)

### Section A — Academic Position and Field

#### A1. Have you ever done research concerning religion?

- Yes
- No

#### A2. Please, mark the academic field that best applies to describe your scholarly work.

- Religious Studies
- Sociology
- Anthropology
- History
- Philosophy
- Psychology
- Economics
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**A3. How many years have you spent in Academia since you first entered your PhD?**

---

**A4. If you were forced to choose, what is your main methodological approach when conducting academic research?**

- Qualitative
- Quantitative
- Mixed-Methods
- I mainly conduct theoretical research

## Section B — Vignettes

*In this part of the study, we ask you to read two academic abstracts and to evaluate them by answering a few questions. The answers are solely about your own views and assessments—there are no right or wrong answers. If you are unsure about a statement, please select the option that you feel best represents your perspective.*

*[Each participant experiences a single combination of experimental conditions; the combination is randomly assigned; the order of the two abstracts is randomly assigned as well.]*

Please, read carefully the study abstract and respond to the following questions.

### Abstract Set 1: Individualization vs. Secularization

**B1. [Condition: Individualization – Secularization conclusion]**

ABSTRACT TEXT

*On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), how much do you agree with the following statements? Scale: 1 (not at all) – 7 (very much)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would be interested in reading the full paper	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the author's findings are convincing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am sceptical of the method used	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I consider the author's findings worth of getting published in an academic journal in the field	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think this kind of research is not relevant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe this type of research provides important insights	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scientists who do research on this topic only find the results they want to find	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think this research design is methodologically unsuitable for investigating secularization	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**E5. Where would you place the author of the abstract on this scale, where 0 means extremely religious and 10 means convinced atheist?**

*0 = Extremely religious* *10 = Convinced atheist*

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

Please, read carefully the study abstract and respond to the following questions.

### Abstract Set 2: Religion and Environmental Attitudes

**F1. [Condition: Religion & Environment – no effect vs. positive effect conclusion]**

ABSTRACT TEXT

*On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), how much do you agree with the following statements? Scale: 1 (not at all) – 7 (very much)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would be interested in reading the full paper	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think the author's findings are convincing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am sceptical of the method used	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I consider the author's findings worth of getting published in an academic journal in the field	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think this kind of research is not relevant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe this type of research provides important insights	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Scientists who do research on this topic only find the results they want to find	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I think this research design is methodologically unsuitable for investigating religion and environmental attitudes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**F3. Where would you place the author of the abstract on this scale, where 0 means extremely religious and 10 means convinced atheist?**

*0 = Extremely religious* *10 = Convinced atheist*

0      1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

## Section G — Tolerance of Ambiguity

**G1. How much do you agree with the following statements:**

*Scale: Strongly disagree – Disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Agree – Strongly Agree*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree
I dislike questions which could be answered correctly in many different ways.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poems with contradictions are annoying.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like stories that have consistent characters.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vague and impressionistic pictures really have little appeal for me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't like to work on a problem unless there's a possibility of coming out with a clear cut answer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's annoying to listen to someone who cannot seem to make up his or her mind.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I hate it when you can't solve a problem right away.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section H — Cognitive Style

### H1. How much do you agree with the following statements:

*Scale: Strongly disagree – Disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Agree – Strongly Agree*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree
I am a firm believer in thinking things through.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I want things to proceed according to plan.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I plan my life logically.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I jump into things without thinking.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't know why I do some of the things I do.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section I — Religious Affiliation and Beliefs

### I1. Do you belong to a religious denomination?

- Yes
- No

### I2. Which one? *[Asked only if I1 = Yes]*

- Catholic
- Protestant
- Orthodox
- Muslim
- Jewish
- Buddhist
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

### I3. Here are some examples of how different people who do not belong to a religious denomination identify themselves. If you had to pick a label, which of these comes closest to how you identify yourself? *[Asked only if I1 = No]*

- Non-religious
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Spiritual but not religious
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**I4. Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?**

- More than once a week
- Once a week
- Once a month
- Only on specific holy day
- Once a year
- Less often
- Never, practically never

**I5. Independently of whether you go to church or not, to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?**

- Very religious
- Moderately religious
- Slightly religious
- Not religious at all

**I6. Do you believe in...?**

	Yes	No	I don't know
Heaven	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hell	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Life after death	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reincarnation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nirvana	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A Higher Power	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The supernatural powers of deceased ancestors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**I7. How important is God in your life?**

*0 = Not at all important*

*10 = Very important*

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

**I8. About how often do you pray outside of religious services?**

- Several times a day
- Once a day
- Several times a week
- Once a week

- Less than once a week
- Never

**I9. To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?**

- Very spiritual
- Moderately spiritual
- Slightly spiritual
- Not spiritual at all

## Section J — Socio-demographics

**J1. What is your gender?**

- Male
- Female
- Other

**J2. Please indicate your year of birth.**

\_\_\_\_\_

## End Message

Should you have any concerns about the questionnaire or if you would like to learn more about the project, please do not hesitate to contact me at: [valeria.rainero@unitn.it](mailto:valeria.rainero@unitn.it)

Best wishes,

Valeria Rainero, PhD Student – University of Trento

**K1. Thank you!**

**K2. If you have any thoughts, comments or feedback on the survey, please feel free to use the space below to share them.**

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# Chapter 5

## Conclusions

### 5.1 Summary of Results

Ask a room of religion scholars whether secularization is real, and you will likely start an argument. On one side stand the defenders of the classical thesis of religious decline, and on the other those who—more or less ferociously—propose alternative models of religious change, persistence, or revival. The divide runs so deep that neutrality hardly seems a viable option. Few debates in the social sciences have proven as persistent. This PhD thesis questions whether the long-standing dispute over secularization may persist not because the empirical evidence is inherently problematic, but because researchers bring their own ideological expectations into the study of religious change. The central question is whether part of the variability in research conclusions is driven by bias in the form of scholars' own religious beliefs. To answer this, the thesis draws on original data from two sources: individual researchers and their publications, combining survey methods, experimental design, and computational text analysis.

The thesis offers an overview of the debate in terms of topics, geography, and structural parochialism; quantifies the magnitude of its divide; investigates whether part of the controversy stems from researchers' secular or religious bias in knowledge production; and examines the reproduction of such bias through peer assessment. Main findings with respect to the central research question can be summarized as follows:

1. It is demonstrated that secularization research is a low-consensus research area, characterized by a high disagreement among social scientists of religion: scholars divide almost equally between defenders and critics of the religious decline thesis. Specifically, 57.3% of researchers personally believe that secularization is occurring, while 42.7% do not. Similarly, 45.9% of published articles find evidence supporting secularization theory, whereas 54.1% do not.
2. We found strong evidence that this high level of disagreement among re-

searchers is not solely linked to contrasting empirical evidence on religious change, but also to researchers' own religious orientations—what we term a (non-)religious bias. The magnitude of this bias is not negligible: researchers with the highest level of religiosity are 24.0 percentage points less likely to believe in secularization and 19.2 percentage points less likely to find evidence of secularization in their published work than their secular colleagues.

3. While the impact of scholars' religiosity on scientific production regarding secularization is clear, its effect on research evaluation is more nuanced. Researchers' religiosity, or secularity, does not systematically compromise the judgment and assessment of scientific results on secularization in general, shedding doubts on the causality of the correlation found between religiosity and research outcomes in the previous analysis. However, I do find that religiosity affects evaluation when the abstract frames religion as having a positive social impact.

4. Religious studies scholars share highly diverse religious orientations. This heterogeneity is significant as the discipline brings together scholars with fundamentally different worldviews about religion and religious change. However, while scholars are very diverse in terms of religiosity, they are not in terms of geography. Most of the literature published on the topic of religious change is produced by scholars located in Western countries.

## 5.2 Theoretical Contributions

These findings contribute to secularization studies by suggesting that the long-standing controversy surrounding secularization theory is unlikely to be resolved through additional empirical evidence or refined analytical tools alone. Non-empirical values—namely researchers' religious orientations—play a significant role in shaping research conclusions. Questions about religious change seem to trigger considerations about the future role of religion in society, making personal values salient and forcing scholars to confront inherently value-laden questions about how the world ought to be. In this sense, secularization appears to be a morally charged topic that entails normative concerns. Results from the last chapter suggest that researchers' religiosity can produce wishful thinking when socio-evaluative stances on religion are at stake.

Findings also point to a methodological divide in the secularization debate. Results across all three studies indicate that methodological choices are not evaluated equally and are associated with systematically different outcomes. Quantitative studies are more likely to report evidence consistent with the secularization thesis

than qualitative or theoretical contributions. Moreover, qualitative studies tend to be evaluated as less rigorous and display lower scholarly impact within the secularization literature, as measured by citation counts. These patterns suggest that methodological choices carry substantive implications for the secularization research program. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that sociology is characterized by persistent methodological divides, with quantitative approaches enjoying a modest but growing advantage in high-status generalist journals (Schwemmer & Wieczorek, 2020). Taken together, these dynamics suggest that research confirming the religious decline hypothesis is likely to enjoy a cumulative advantage. Quantitative studies, which are more likely to support secularization, have greater access to top-tier publication venues, which in turn provide higher visibility and citation potential. As a result, secularization-confirming findings may become increasingly amplified within the discipline, due to the interaction between methodological preferences and publication advantages, independently of the possibility that quantitative designs might actually be better suited to detect longitudinal change in religious beliefs and behaviors.

Beyond the subfield of the sociology of religion, this thesis contributes to broader debates on objectivity and bias in the social sciences by situating these concerns within the empirical framework of the science of science. Rather than treating objectivity as a purely normative ideal or philosophical aspiration, this work approaches it as an empirical outcome of social and institutional processes that can be systematically studied. In this perspective, bias is not conceived as an individual moral failure, but as a set of mechanisms that may enter scientific production and evaluation at multiple stages.

This approach aligns with a growing body of metascientific research seeking to explain why empirical findings in the social sciences often diverge across studies, methods, and research traditions. Prior work has identified several sources of such variation. Studies indicate confirmation bias, where authors seek and favor findings that support their pre-existing beliefs (Bishop, 2020; Chambers, 2017; Masnick & Zimmerman, 2009); publication bias, in which editors and reviewers' decisions on a manuscript are taken based on the appealing of results and not based on scientific motivations (Franco et al., 2014; Gerber & Malhotra, 2008); and the accumulation of noise and error arising from human judgment and fallibility (Baldacchino & Kahn, 2011) or questionable research practices (John et al., 2012). In addition, research in the science of science has documented how structural inequalities related to academic prestige, institutional location, gender, and geography shape whose work is published, evaluated positively, and ultimately cited.

Within this literature, a smaller but expanding line of inquiry has examined

whether researchers' ideological commitments systematically influence scientific outcomes. Much of this work has focused on political ideology. Experimental studies of peer review have shown that reviewers evaluate otherwise identical research more favorably when its conclusions align with their political orientations (e.g., Abramowitz et al. 1975; Finseraas et al. 2022). Other studies have examined ideology in the content of research itself. For instance, Borjas and Breznau (2026) find robust evidence of ideological bias in the research production of immigration-related research. Eitan et al. (2018) looking at scientific abstracts from social psychology, find that conservatives and conservative ideas are described significantly more negatively than liberals and liberal ideas. Similarly, Jelveh et al. (2024) find that researchers' political partisanship is reflected in the language and framing of their published work. This thesis extends this literature by introducing religiosity as an additional dimension of ideological bias in the social sciences. Focusing on the social scientific study of religion itself, it shows that scholars' religious orientations can shape research findings on secularization. Evaluations of research and attributions of author identity may also be affected when studies portray religion as socially beneficial. In doing so, the thesis demonstrates that ideological bias is not confined to political domains but may also operate through religious worldviews in fields where personal identity and scholarly inquiry are closely intertwined.

### 5.3 Future directions

The findings of this thesis point to the presence of a potential religious (or secular) bias in secularization research. An important limitation must nonetheless be acknowledged with respect to causal inference. Although a robust association emerges between researchers' religiosity and patterns of findings in the secularization literature, the cross-sectional nature of the analysis does not permit causal claims (Breen, 2022). Moreover, results from the survey experiment do not yield statistically significant effects to support definitive conclusions about ideological bias in the evaluation of research on secularization.

These contrasting results can be interpreted in at least three ways. First, it is possible that the observed association between researchers' religiosity and research outcomes is purely correlational and may not reflect a causal relationship. Second, the null result for the experimental study might reflect a methodological flaw of the survey instrument. In real peer review assessments, scholars are able to read the full paper which makes the survey instrument lacking external validity. Thus, this survey design might underestimate the extent of evaluative bias in practice. A

third explanation is that ideological bias may not operate through the evaluation or interpretation of research findings but in the earlier stages of the research process: the selection of research questions, methodological choices, model specifications, operationalizations, and sampling decisions. In this view, bias would be embedded primarily in research production rather than in peer review or assessment. This interpretation is consistent with recent findings by Borjas and Breznau (2026), who provide compelling evidence that ideology can shape research outcomes through research design choices. Exploiting a unique setting in which multiple research teams analyzed the same dataset to answer the same research question on immigration policy, they show that a small set of design decisions accounts for approximately two-thirds of the difference in reported results across teams with different ideological orientations. Importantly, research design choices that uniquely generated large negative effects were adopted almost exclusively by teams holding more restrictive views on immigration, while the opposite pattern held for teams with more permissive orientations. As Borjas and Breznau (2026) conclude, research design is not neutral but constitutes a key endogenous mechanism through which ideology enters the production of scientific findings.

Building on this insight, one promising avenue for future research on religious bias in scientific production would involve experimental or quasi-experimental designs that explicitly control research design choices. For instance, scholars could be asked to analyze the same dataset while being allowed to explore alternative model specifications, with close attention to how and why certain specifications are selected, modified, or discarded. Such an approach was not feasible within the present thesis, given the substantial heterogeneity of the analyzed literature, which spans theoretical contributions, qualitative studies, and quantitative ones that could not be compared.

A particularly promising strategy would combine crowdsourced data analysis with survey data on researchers' characteristics, linking participants' religious orientations to their analytical decisions in a "one dataset, many analysts" framework. This design would make it possible to observe the full analytical workflow and to identify where ideological considerations enter the scientific process, producing what Gelman and Loken (2014) term the "garden of forking paths" to describe the hidden universe of possible choices researchers have that can lead to highly diverse results, also referred to as "researchers' degrees of freedom". This approach could be extended to other contested domains in the social sciences—such as inequality, family structure, immigration, or criminal justice—where empirical questions are closely intertwined with moral and political worldviews.

A further line of future investigation concerns the role of religious or ideolog-

ical bias in other contingent domains of scientific practice, such as co-authorship networks, citation patterns, career trajectories, and replication success. Existing research in these areas has documented various forms of inequality and cumulative advantage, including gender and ethnic discrimination in academic careers (Kozlowski et al., 2022; Ross et al., 2022), childbearing penalties (Lutter & Schröder, 2020), prestige effects associated with elite institutions (Zhang et al., 2022), and global North–South disparities in scientific recognition (Castro Torres & Alburez-Gutierrez, 2022; Gomez et al., 2022). By contrast, relatively few studies have examined whether ideological bias operates in these domains, and the available evidence is mixed. For example, Yancey and Chadwick (2012) document discrimination against religious and political conservatives in academic hiring preferences, whereas Reiner (2020) finds no association between the political leaning of research articles and their likelihood of successful replication. Extending this line of inquiry would help clarify whether ideological inequalities operate beyond research production and evaluation, shaping academic careers and knowledge diffusion more broadly.

An additional limitation of this thesis concerns the population investigated. The analysis focuses exclusively on religious bias within the social scientific study of religion, and on secularization research in particular. Whether similar forms of religious bias operate in the broader social sciences remains an open question. The field of religious studies itself displays substantial value diversity: approximately half of the respondents in this study report a religious affiliation, while the remainder do not. This degree of heterogeneity appears unusual when compared to the wider social sciences, which are characterized by pronounced secular homogeneity (Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007; Gross & Simmons, 2009). This raises an important question for future research: is religious bias less relevant in highly secular fields due to the near absence of religious scholars, or might it be more consequential precisely because of this homogeneity, potentially creating a less welcoming environment for religious minorities within academia?

Finally, an important direction for future research concerns how the scientific community can mitigate religious and ideological bias. Two possible strategies merit attention: the expansion of open science practices and the promotion of value diversity within academic fields. Practices such as preregistration, data and code sharing, adversarial collaboration, and results-blind peer review are unlikely to eliminate bias entirely, but they can make it more visible, contestable, and subject to collective scrutiny. In this sense, bias is not denied but institutionally recognized and managed. While disciplines such as economics and political science have developed relatively strong norms around transparency and code sharing, sociology and the scientific study of religion continue to lag behind in the adoption of these practices

(Auspurg & Brüderl, 2022; Breznau, 2021; Savolainen, 2025).

At the same time, sociology and related disciplines may benefit from greater value pluralism, particularly when addressing morally sensitive topics. Social scientists are predominantly secular (Ecklund & Scheitle, 2007; Gross & Simmons, 2009) and overwhelmingly left-leaning (Gross & Simmons, 2014). Prior work identifies at least three mechanisms through which ideological diversity can enhance scientific rigor: reducing confirmation bias by exposing claims to a wider range of critiques; constraining motivated reasoning through natural adversarial collaboration; and safeguarding dissent by normalizing disagreement and protecting intellectual freedom (Duarte et al., 2015; Savolainen, 2025). From this perspective, fostering intellectual diversity—including religious one—within academic departments and research communities can serve as a check on individual biases and strengthen the collective epistemic robustness of the discipline.

Savolainen (2025) further suggests that these two strategies—open science and value pluralism—are interconnected. His analysis argues that sociology combines particularly high ideological homogeneity with relatively weak commitments to transparency and causal rigor compared to adjacent disciplines such as economics, political science, and psychology. This combination may hinder methodological innovation and credibility advancement. He suggests that stagnation in open science practices is not merely a technical issue, but is linked to broader patterns of value consensus and normative orientation within the field.

Improvements on ideological homogeneity, credibility, and transparency may also have implications beyond internal academic debates. Public distrust in science is demonstrated to be linked to perceptions of ideological uniformity and politicization of scientific institutions (Gauchat 2012; Pew Research Center 2019). Greater political and religious pluralism within academia may therefore not only strengthen internal scientific standards, but also improve engagement with segments of the public that are traditionally more skeptical of science, including religious conservatives.

In conclusion, the social sciences navigate precarious terrain where moral ideas and normative concerns inevitably engage researchers' own beliefs and orientations. Acknowledging this does not undermine scientific rigor: rather, such self-reflection strengthens the discipline's epistemic integrity and capacity for self-correction. Moving toward a more open and transparent social science requires this kind of critical engagement with our internal practices, values, and norms.

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